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# UK election 2015

Setting the agenda

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Martin Moore and Gordon Ramsay

Centre for the Study of Media,  
Communication and Power

October 2015



## About the authors

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He was previously founding director of the Media Standards Trust (2006-2015) where he directed the Election Unspun project and wrote extensively on the news media and public policy. Research publications included: *Election Unspun: Political Parties, the press, and Twitter during the 2015 election campaign* (2015), *Who was hacked? An investigation into phone hacking and its victims* (2015), *Addressing the Democratic Deficit in Local News through Positive Plurality* (2014) and *IPSO: An Assessment* (2013).

Dr Moore is author of *The Origins of Modern Spin* (Palgrave Macmillan 2006) and 'Plurality and Local Media' in *Media Power and Plurality*, ed Steven Barnett and Judith Townend (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

### Gordon Ramsay

Dr Gordon Ramsay is deputy director of the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, and a Research Fellow in the Policy Institute at King's College London.

Prior to joining King's, Dr Ramsay was a Research Fellow at the Media Standards Trust where he ran the Election Unspun project and worked closely on the development of the digital content research tool Steno. At the Media Standards Trust he published research on media coverage of the Leveson Inquiry and its aftermath, and co-authored a report making recommendations on reform of press regulation and legislation submitted to the independent Leveson Inquiry.

Dr Ramsay has previously conducted research on the media and politics at the University of Westminster, Cardiff University and the University of Glasgow.

# Preface

*UK election 2015: setting the agenda* builds on innovative work by Dr Martin Moore and Dr Gordon Ramsay started in January 2015. Using new methods for collecting and analysing news and social media content, the report provides a fresh perspective on how political communication is changing in the digital era.

Moore and Ramsay began collecting and analysing media coverage of the UK 2015 election campaign at the beginning of 2015, using a software tool they developed while at the Media Standards Trust. For 11 weeks from February 2015 they published weekly reports charting media coverage of the campaign (published at [electionunspun.net](http://electionunspun.net)). For the official campaign itself, from 30 March 2015, in addition to mainstream news media, they collected and analysed the tweets of political actors and influencers.

The substantial data they collected underpinned *Election Unspun: political parties, the press, and Twitter during the 2015 election campaign*, published in July 2015. This examined, through more than 50 charts and infographics, the relationship between politicians, mainstream media and social media over the course of the campaign.

The week by week analyses published online at [electionunspun.net](http://electionunspun.net) and the charts and data published in *Election Unspun* in July provided the foundations for this new report. Through careful analysis of over 200,000 news articles and over a million tweets they illuminate the dynamics of political agenda-setting over the course of the 2015 election.

The authors began this work while at the Media Standards Trust. Moore and Ramsay have now joined the Policy Institute at King's where they are starting a new research centre called the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power.

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# 1 | Key findings

# 1 | Key findings

This is an analysis of party political communication in the press, and amongst political actors and influencers on Twitter during the UK 2015 General Election campaign.

It is based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of articles published online in 16 national news outlets and on more than one million tweets by more than 3,000 political actors and influencers. The content was collected using a digital content analysis tool, called Steno, developed specifically for the purpose.

## Parties and candidates on Twitter

- Candidates were generally cautious and controlled on Twitter. They avoided dialogue and kept closely to the party political script.
- The leaders of the main parties used Twitter to record their set-piece events around the country and promote party proposals.
- The leaders of the smaller parties used Twitter more informally, to retweet colleagues and occasionally to respond to journalists.
- The party press offices of the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats were used for rapid rebuttal, promotion of party policy, and attacks on the opposition.

## The press and the campaign

- The press rarely altered the news agenda of the lead parties during the campaign; few stories significantly disrupted or subverted the issues put forward by one or both of the two main parties.

- Like the Conservatives and Labour, the press largely focused on the economy. Almost a third of all political articles published during the campaign referred to the economy.
- Parties co-ordinated closely with the press on certain stories, doing interviews and editorials, and sometimes going further. For example, a *Telegraph* front page story about 'an exclusive letter to the Telegraph' from 5,000 small businesses was later revealed to be based on a document orchestrated by the Conservative Party.
- Of the newspaper leader columns that expressed a view about the Conservatives, 51 per cent were positive. Of those that expressed a view about Labour, 21 per cent were positive. Of the 59 leader columns expressing a view about the SNP, 58 were negative.
- Of the 115 front-page headlines that supported specific parties or announced their policies, 80 were favourable to the Conservatives and 30 supported Labour.

## Influencers on Twitter

- Political influencers also kept closely to the agenda of issues set by the parties and mainstream media.
- These influencers – many of whom were themselves mainstream journalists – were more likely to challenge the narrative of the parties and of mainstream media. They were more likely to bring attention to inconsistencies between party claims and independent analysis, to point people to original sources that contradicted party or press claims, and to satirise stage-managed announcements and events.
- Specialist influencers on twitter – those who were focused on specific policy areas – kept less closely to the agenda set by the parties and mainstream media.
- Defence policy influencers were far less interested in following the party political or mainstream media agenda. 48 per cent of their tweets about politics were about defence or foreign policy (as compared to 8 per cent of tweets on average).

- ♦ Social policy influencers were more engaged with the mainstream media agenda, but chiefly where it overlapped with health, welfare or housing.

### Issue agendas and public opinion

- ♦ Despite the party and media focus on the economy, health and immigration remained, for the public, two of the most important issues facing Britain during the campaign.
- ♦ Immigration was considered the most important issue facing Britain in 4 out of 5 months between January and May 2015. In contrast, it was the fifth most covered issue in mainstream media, and the ninth most discussed by political actors and influencers on Twitter.

## 2 | Introduction



## 2 | Introduction

Seventy years ago, when people voted in the UK General Election their decision was based on a relatively constrained number of information sources. Apart from their own lived experience, and the experience of those around them, their election knowledge was based on the news and views of national and local newspapers (necessarily very short due to paper rationing), on radio broadcasts, and on newsreels.<sup>1</sup>

When people voted in the UK General Election of 7 May 2015 they were faced with a virtually limitless number of sources. In addition to their own experience, most people had access to social media, mainstream news outlets, international news outlets, niche news sites, party political news, blogs and YouTube.<sup>2</sup>

It is a truism to say that, compared to the relative media scarcity of 70 years ago, we live in times of media obesity. It does, however, need to be emphasised since it has such an important bearing on any contemporary analysis of election communication.

No analysis can take account of all the information that is published. Any study of political communication and the election needs to narrow its focus to specific media and questions or find itself quickly overwhelmed.

This report focuses on the content published by the UK's national news media online during the 2015 election campaign and on the output of political actors and influencers on Twitter. It is based on analysis of online news

content published on the websites of the national press, digital news providers and the major broadcast news outlets. Most importantly, it allows comparisons to be drawn between the content of very different news sources. It concentrates on the dynamics of agenda setting, particularly the role that the parties, the press and influencers on Twitter played in setting or changing the agenda.

It does not exclude other media, such as television or radio, Facebook or blogs - although it only looks at these in respect of their relationship with the press or social news media. We did not, for example, study broadcast news bulletins or measure their content. Studies conducted by the Cardiff University School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies and Loughborough University's Communication Research Centre did look at audio and video news (among other aspects of political journalism).

Though the focus of this analysis may appear narrow, it still assesses over 200,000 articles published across 16 national news sites, and over a million tweets posted by more than 3,000 political actors and influencers on Twitter.

The remarkable cornucopia of content available may seem to make the whole idea of 'agenda-setting' seem slightly simplistic. Who can set the agenda for 64 million people in a world of almost limitless information in a country with close to universal access?<sup>3</sup> Yet, as the analysis shows, even across such diverse outlets, and amongst so many voices, there is a significant degree to which different outlets and individuals gather around similar topics. What these topics are, and why they congregate around them, is the central focus of this report.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ofcom, 'Infrastructure Report 2014', <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/infrastructure/infrastructure-2014/>, (accessed 8 September 2015).

<sup>4</sup> This analysis focuses on several themes that emerged during our analysis. For a comprehensive review of the data we gathered during the Election Unspun project, see Moore et al., *Election Unspun: Political parties, the press, and Twitter during the 2015 election campaign*. Available online at: [http://mediastandardstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Election\\_Unspun\\_July\\_2015i.pdf](http://mediastandardstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Election_Unspun_July_2015i.pdf).

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, M., *The Origins of Modern Spin*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 'Digital News Report 2015,' <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2015/executive-summary-and-key-findings-2015/>

## 3 | Methodology

### 3 | Methodology

This report is based on two parallel quantitative content analyses – coverage of the 2015 General Election by the UK’s main online national news outlets and amongst political actors and influencers on Twitter.

Using a bespoke digital news analysis tool – Steno – we gathered over 250,000 news articles and over one million tweets during the official campaign period of Monday 30 March until midnight on Wednesday 6 May. We then applied automated tagging to analyse the content of the resulting datasets. Using an adapted version of the Ipsos MORI Issues Index we were also able to tag articles on the basis of which policy issues they contained.

This research was used to underpin the Election Unspun project, run by the authors of this report (then at the Media Standards Trust) in conjunction with the Policy Institute at King’s.<sup>5</sup> This section outlines the methodology used for the project; technical information on the software used, and the tagging methods. There is further detail on the methodology in the Appendix.

#### Sampling: National news outlets

We collected all articles published online in 16 national news outlets from Monday 5 January until midnight on Wednesday 6 May, the day before polling day (reporting restrictions on polling day affect how news outlets can cover

the campaign).<sup>6</sup> The outlets chosen were those which are national and UK oriented in their focus, and publish articles based on news reporting on a daily basis. Due to constraints on the number of sources we could analyse, we decided not to include the online components of weekly publications such as the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator*. The final list included the websites of all national newspapers (and their Sunday editions, where separate sites exist), the news sites of the main public service broadcasters and the UK politics components of two large digital only news publishers. The final list consisted of the following:

News outlet	URL
BBC	bbc.co.uk/news
ITV	itv.com/news
Channel 4	channel4.com/news
Sky News	news.sky.com
The <i>Daily Mail</i>	dailymail.co.uk
The <i>Sun</i>	thesun.co.uk
The <i>Daily Express</i>	express.co.uk
The <i>Daily Mirror</i> and the <i>Sunday People</i> )	mirror.co.uk
The <i>Daily Star</i> and <i>Daily Star Sunday</i>	dailystar.co.uk
The <i>Daily Telegraph</i>	telegraph.co.uk
The <i>Times</i>	thetimes.co.uk
The <i>Sunday Times</i>	thesundaytimes.co.uk
The <i>Financial Times</i>	ft.com
The <i>Guardian</i>	theguardian.com/uk
The Huffington post UK	huffingtonpost.co.uk
Buzzfeed UK Politics	buzzfeed.com/ukpolitics

<sup>5</sup> Moore, M. et al., *Election Unspun: Political parties, the press, and Twitter during the 2015 election campaign*, [http://mediastandardstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Election\\_Unspun\\_July\\_2015i.pdf](http://mediastandardstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Election_Unspun_July_2015i.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Most of the analysis in this report concerns the official election campaign, from Monday 30 March until Wednesday 6 May. Any results derived from other timeframes will be labelled accordingly.

## Sampling: Twitter

Since our aim was to understand the dynamics of political influence and agenda setting, we made a conscious decision to focus on a carefully selected set of political actors and political influencers on Twitter. We did not want to use Twitter as a proxy for public opinion and we were conscious that generating representative samples is a key concern in any analysis of Twitter.<sup>7</sup> For these reasons we chose to focus our analysis on parliamentary candidates and political influencers on Twitter. In addition to primary political influencers and political news organisations, we also identified influencers in two distinct areas of policy – social policy and defence policy. The resulting six groups of profiles – 3,290 in total – consisted of the following:

- ♦ 460 parliamentary candidates (incumbents)
- ♦ 1,952 parliamentary candidates (challengers/non-incumbents)
- ♦ 309 political influencers
- ♦ 268 social policy influencers
- ♦ 150 defence policy influencers
- ♦ 151 political news organisations.

Twitter profiles for parliamentary candidates (challengers and incumbents) were compiled with the aid of yournextmp.com and through online search. In total, we identified and followed 460 incumbent MPs on Twitter, and a further 1,952 challengers.

‘Political news organisations’ denotes organisations that publish news or information relevant to UK politics and to the election campaign. It encompasses the Twitter profiles affiliated to news organisations, as well as those of think tanks, research centres, universities and campaign groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Bruns, A., Liang, YE., *Tools and methods for capturing Twitter data during natural disasters*. First Monday, Vol. 17, No. 4, <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3937/3193>, accessed on 24 July 2015. Gaffney, D., Puschmann, C., *Data collection on Twitter*, Twitter and Society, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013.

Organisations whose Twitter accounts had been inactive for significant periods of time, or twitter accounts that were not publishing content about the campaign, were not included.

Influencers were identified and selected on the basis of five criteria:

- ♦ number of tweets (also accounting for frequency)
- ♦ number of followers
- ♦ number of accounts followed
- ♦ Klout score (a number from 1-100 derived from various measures representing online social influence)
- ♦ content of tweets (qualitative).

We specified an appropriate minimum in each criteria for each set of influencers. We set this minimum through observation, through analysis of existing tweets on political topics, through analysis of dialogue on Twitter and degree of authority (number of retweets and by whom). We also drew upon existing Twitter lists of influencers, for example at Tweetminster, and reviewed the list with a Twitter user we had classified as a political influencer. We then opened the lists to external scrutiny and invited comments. The criteria for ‘political influencers’ were:

- ♦ has published a minimum of 1,000 tweets
- ♦ has a minimum of 5,000 followers
- ♦ follows a minimum of 100 other accounts on Twitter
- ♦ has a Klout score greater than 55
- ♦ tweets about UK politics.

This generated a list of 309 Twitter accounts designated as ‘political influencers’.

To build a list of specialist influencers in specific policy, we used similar criteria. For social policy influencers we worked closely with the Social Care Research Workforce Unit at the Policy Institute at King’s. Our list of defence

policy influencers was developed with the help of Thomas Colley, a doctoral student in the King's College London Department of War Studies. For both groups of policy influencers we performed a similar task of observation and cross referencing against existing Twitter lists to highlight suitable accounts. The criteria applied for these groups were:

- ♦ has published a minimum of 500 tweets
- ♦ has a minimum of 1,000 followers
- ♦ follows a minimum of 100 other accounts on Twitter.

Based on these criteria we identified 268 social policy influencers and 150 defence policy influencers.

Tweets were gathered by a bespoke digital content tool (Steno) using the Twitter public application program interface (API). We regularly cross checked the content that was collected with individual profiles on Twitter to confirm the collection was comprehensive for these profiles.

### Adapting the Ipsos MORI Issues Index

One of the primary aims of the project was to compare the different policy agendas of different groups of actors – political parties, media outlets and the public. To do this we had to develop a way to break down news coverage into discrete policy areas, and to build a script that could automatically tag articles and tweets on the basis of which policy areas they referenced. We decided to use the Ipsos MORI Issues Index based on its comprehensiveness and robustness. The Issues Index has been developed over almost three decades based on regular face to face interviews of a sample of the population. Respondents are not prompted, so a large range of policy concerns have been incorporated over the years. In total, the Issues Index identifies 38 policy areas of concern to the public.

In order to make the list of policy areas more manageable, we amalgamated some related topics. For instance, 'pollution/environment', 'population levels/overpopulation', 'foot and mouth outbreak/farming crisis' and 'countryside/rural life' were combined into a new 'environment' category. Several original categories (such as 'immigration/immigrants' and 'education/schools') were retained, and the final list comprised 14 policy areas:

- ♦ immigration/immigrants
- ♦ NHS/health
- ♦ economy/finance
- ♦ defence/foreign affairs/international terrorism
- ♦ crime/law and order/violence/vandalism/ASB/domestic terrorism
- ♦ education/schools
- ♦ welfare
- ♦ EU/Europe/Euro
- ♦ environment
- ♦ transport/public transport
- ♦ local government/council tax
- ♦ devolution/constitutional reform
- ♦ fuel and energy
- ♦ housing.

This created a manageable but still comprehensive list of issues to analyse, while still allowing comparison with the monthly Issues Index surveys of issue salience among the public. A demonstration of how scripts were used to tag articles on the basis of which policy areas they included is included in the Appendix.

### Additional Analysis

As well as the quantitative research of online news articles and tweets conducted using Steno, additional secondary analyses were undertaken in order to better understand the main themes that arose in election coverage, as well as in the conduct of the campaign itself.

We performed content analyses of newspaper front page headlines, and of newspapers' leader articles each day in order to measure the level and nature of partisanship in the UK press. The methods of data collection for the partisanship analysis are set out in the Appendix.

After polling day, we also undertook a qualitative analysis of many of the articles and tweets that were published over the course of the campaign. This allowed us to identify key themes in how the campaign was presented, the nature of the language used and the ways in which social media users responded to, and interacted with, the campaign.

## 4 | The immediate verdict

## 4 | The immediate verdict

In the immediate aftermath of the General Election there was no shortage of people casting their verdict on the importance of different media during the campaign.

Many quickly dismissed the significance of social media. ‘UK poll explodes myth of social media power’ Rupert Murdoch tweeted, ‘Great time for competitive free press’.<sup>8</sup> ‘Welcome to the social media election that never was’, was the headline of David Fletcher’s piece in the *Guardian*.<sup>9</sup> While the BBC’s technology correspondent, Rory Cellan-Jones wrote that ‘for the most part, social media followed the campaign rather than led it. The running was made by those old dead-tree newspapers which proved, whether Twitter liked it or not, that they could still punch above their weight’.<sup>10</sup>

Several academics and journalists agreed with Cellan-Jones’ verdict and concluded that national newspapers, whether published print or online, broadly set the agenda for the campaign. ‘Despite all the predictions about the demise of the press’ wrote Steven Barnett, ‘and grand statements about a “truly social media election”, the UK national press therefore still dominates Britain’s national conversation and was instrumental in setting the campaign

agenda’.<sup>11</sup> In the same publication Des Freedman echoed Barnett’s conclusion writing that ‘the pro-Tory press – [is] still setting the broader news agenda despite repeated claims of its imminent demise’.<sup>12</sup> Academic and journalist Roy Greenslade did not have ‘a shadow of doubt that Ed Miliband lost because of newspaper coverage’, arguing that its coverage of UKIP lent that party and its policies credence.<sup>13</sup>

Yet there were many who argued against the importance of the national press. Ex-editor Piers Morgan suggested TV and social media were now ‘just as influential’ as the papers.<sup>14</sup> Charlie Beckett listed a dozen reasons why he believed the right wing press did not defeat Miliband and cited television as ‘the dominant medium’.<sup>15</sup> Richard Sambrook also believed ‘TV remains dominant’, though research he led with Stephen Cushion showed the extent to which television agendas ‘followed stories broken in the press’.<sup>16</sup>

8 Rupert Murdoch, @rupertmurdoch, 13 May 2015 <https://twitter.com/rupertmurdoch/status/598440625416069120>.

9 Fletcher, D., ‘Welcome to the social media election that never was’, *theguardian.com*, 27 April 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2015/apr/27/social-media-general-election-political-parties> (Accessed 31st July 2015).

10 Cellan-Jones, R., ‘Election 2015: It wasn’t social media ‘wot won it’’, *BBC News*, 11 May 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-32689145> (Accessed 27 July 2015).

11 Barnett, S., ‘Four reasons why a partisan press helped win it for the Tories’, in Jackson, D. and Thorsen, E. (eds.) *UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign*, 2015, [http://j.mp/UK Election Analysis 2015\\_Jackson-and-Thorsen\\_v1](http://j.mp/UK Election Analysis 2015_Jackson-and-Thorsen_v1) (Accessed 3 August 2015).

12 Freedman, D., ‘Election 2015: it’s the press wot won it?’, in Jackson, D. and Thorsen, E. (eds.) *UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign*, [http://j.mp/UK Election Analysis 2015\\_Jackson-and-Thorsen\\_v1](http://j.mp/UK Election Analysis 2015_Jackson-and-Thorsen_v1) (Accessed 3 August 2015).

13 Greenslade, R., ‘Yes, rightwing newspaper coverage did cause Ed Miliband’s downfall’, *The Guardian*, 11 May 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2015/may/11/yes-right-wing-newspaper-coverage-did-cause-edmilibands-downfall> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

14 Piers Morgan, @piersmorgan, 30 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/piersmorgan/status/593742135356174336>.

15 Beckett, C., ‘Did the right wing press defeat Miliband? No. [12 reasons and counting]’, *Polis*, 12 May 2015, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2015/05/12/did-the-rightwing-press-defeat-miliband-no/> (Accessed 31 July 2015); ‘Media coverage of the General Election 2015’, 7 May 2015, <http://www.slideshare.net/charliebeckett/media-coverage-of-the-british-general-election-2015-first-thoughts> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

16 Sambrook, R., quoted in Clarke, S., ‘UK’s ‘Social Media’ Election Trumped by Old Media Coverage’, *Variety*, 29 April 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/tv/global/uk-s-social-media-election-trumped-by-old-media-coverage-1201483459/> (Accessed 31 July 2015); Sambrook, R. and Cushion, S., ‘How TV news let the Tories fight the election on their own terms’, *the guardian.com*, 15 May 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/may/15/tv-news-let-the-tories-fight-the-election-coalition-economy-taxation> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

It is impossible for us to know exactly how much influence any particular media, outlet or individual had on the overall campaign agenda, let alone what impact this then had on each of the voters. Engrossing and instructive as these arguments are, this report does not try to answer this issue. Instead, it examines the dynamics between the parties, the press and social media, and assesses how each platform was used in an effort to set or change the agenda.

## 5 | The shrink wrapped campaign



## 5 | The shrink wrapped campaign

According to journalists who reported on the UK 2015 election campaign, it was one of the most pre-planned and controlled that they had experienced.

Andrew Grice, who has covered every election since 1983, said it was ‘the most stage managed campaign I’ve witnessed’.<sup>17</sup> Journalist and commentator Steve Hewlett said he had ‘never before seen this level of manipulation by the political parties during a British General Election’.<sup>18</sup> *Channel 4 News*’ Alex Thomson wrote that it was ‘an election widely derided for plastic, risk-averse false ‘campaigning’ with fake crowds’.<sup>19</sup>

The introduction of fixed term parliaments partly explains this level of stage management. The 2015 election was the first in UK history whose date was known years in advance. All parties and press had more time than ever before to prepare campaign events, hone the key messages and develop campaign materials.

The parties made these preparations conscious that, in a world of Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Periscope and WhatsApp, any embarrassing incidents, errors of judgment or miscommunication would be recorded and spread all over social media – and then mainstream media –

within minutes. In this context, the main parties organised events in warehouses and factories with audiences of party activists and employees, and arranged photo opportunities where the risks of interruption were minimised.

Marina Hyde, who was reporting from the campaign trail for the *Guardian*, described how the campaign was ‘staged in out-of-town business parks, cleared factory floors, deserted building sites, and town halls filled with pre-screened party supporters’.<sup>20</sup> *Spectator* journalist Isabel Hardman published photographs of a Conservative ‘rally’ that showed a small gathering of supporters crammed together behind a campaign bus, within a vast, otherwise empty warehouse.<sup>21</sup>

Journalists reported being shut out of campaign events and being prevented from taking pictures. Restrictions on access were such that the National Union of Journalists released a statement on 14 April saying it was ‘deeply concerned about reports from local newspapers and our members in the BBC that reporters and photographers... are being denied access or are being blocked from asking the questions they know their readers and viewers want to hear’ during the campaign.<sup>22</sup> ‘George Osborne’s visit to a factory in Bury North this week stands out’ wrote a regional journalist, ‘There were four local reporters. No members of the public – apart from the factory workers, who presumably had no choice. And six press officers’.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Grice on *The Media Show*, BBC Radio 4, 6 May 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05strvn>.

<sup>18</sup> Hewlett, S., quoted in Clarke, S., ‘UK’s ‘Social Media’ Election Trumped by Old Media Coverage’, *Variety*, 29 April 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/tv/global/uk-s-social-media-election-trumped-by-old-media-coverage-1201483459/> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Thomson, A., ‘Voters love the ‘most dangerous woman in Britain’’, *Mashable UK*, 29 April 2015, <http://mashable.com/2015/04/29/uk-election-nicola-sturgeon/> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Hyde, M., ‘The great unvetted public locked out as party leaders tour sanitised Britain’, *The Guardian*, 10 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/apr/10/the-great-unvetted-public-locked-out-as-party-leaders-tour-sanitised-britain> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Hardman, I., ‘The Tory ‘rally’ that wasn’t: these photos reveal how modern campaigning works’, *The Spectator Blogs*, 7 April 2015, <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2015/04/how-election-campaigning-works/> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

<sup>22</sup> National Union of Journalists, ‘NUJ statement on media access to covering the general election’, 14 April 2015, <https://www.nuj.org.uk/news/nuj-statement-on-media-access-to-covering-the-general-election/> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Williams, J., ‘The Conservatives are strategising regional media out of the grid – and it won’t help their cause’, *The Spectator Blogs*, 23 April 2015, <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2015/04/the-conservatives-are-strategising-regional-media-out-of-the-grid-and-it-wont-help-their-cause/> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

At the same time there was a steady flow of party statements, approved photographs and photo opportunities, and party political performances. 'Day after day, the Tories had contrived the photo opportunities so that there were better pictures of Cameron than Miliband' Dan Sabbagh reported in the *Guardian*.<sup>24</sup>

The result, from many journalists' perspectives, was a campaign 'devoid of spirit'.<sup>25</sup> Michael Crick lamented how 2015 was 'far from the open campaigning of years gone by, when Harold Wilson or Ted Heath would do genuine walkabouts. Nor is there the spontaneity of John Major's soapbox elections of 1992 and 1997'.<sup>26</sup>

It also meant that there were few unscripted moments in the UK 2015 election campaign. There was certainly nothing comparable to 'bigot-gate' in 2010, when Gordon Brown's unguarded comments about a Rochdale pensioner concerned about immigration were caught on a microphone he had failed to remove. Nor was there anything comparable to the Emily Thornberry incident during the Rochester and Strood by-election in November 2014, when the Labour MP tweeted a picture of a white van parked outside a house draped with Union Jack flags with the caption 'Image from #Rochester'.

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<sup>24</sup> Sabbagh, D., 'How the Tories won the general election air war', *The Guardian*, 11 May 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/may/11/tories-general-election-david-cameron-labour> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Sambrook, R., quoted in Clarke, S., 'UK's 'Social Media' Election Trumped by Old Media Coverage', *Variety*, 29 April 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/tv/global/uk-social-media-election-trumped-by-old-media-coverage-1201483459/> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Crick, M., 'Election 2015: Not exactly the golden age of campaigning', *Channel 4 News blogs*, 16 April 2015, <http://blogs.channel4.com/michael-crick-on-politics/ed-miliband-labour-party-hornsey-town-hall-david-axelrod/4881> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

## 6 | Party political communication in 2015

# 6 | Party Political Communication in 2015

Unsurprisingly for a carefully planned campaign, each of the main parties had significant amounts of party political material ready to distribute and the machinery in place to spread it.

All the main parties uploaded videos to YouTube. The Greens and Liberal Democrats both uploaded more than 100 each.<sup>27</sup> The parties also used public pages on Facebook extensively, the Labour party publishing almost 500 posts, and the Conservatives over 200.<sup>28</sup> UKIP gained the most ‘likes’ per Facebook post with 7,000, as compared to Labour with 1,200, according to the *Telegraph*.<sup>29</sup> Labour released celebrity endorsements via YouTube, notably by Martin Freeman and Steve Coogan. The Conservatives gamified some aspects of political participation, developing a site that allowed supporters to gain points if they ‘share the facts’.

All parties and most of the parliamentary candidates also used Twitter during the campaign.

## Candidates on Twitter: Cautious and Controlled

Rather than witnessing a flowering of political engagement and dialogue between political candidates and the public

27 Lilleker, D., ‘The battle for the online audience: 2015 as the social media election?’ in Jackson, D. and Thorsen, E. (eds.) *UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign*, 2015, [http://j.mp/UK Election Analysis 2015\\_Jackson-and-Thorsen\\_v1](http://j.mp/UK Election Analysis 2015_Jackson-and-Thorsen_v1) (Accessed 3 August 2015).

28 *Ibid.*

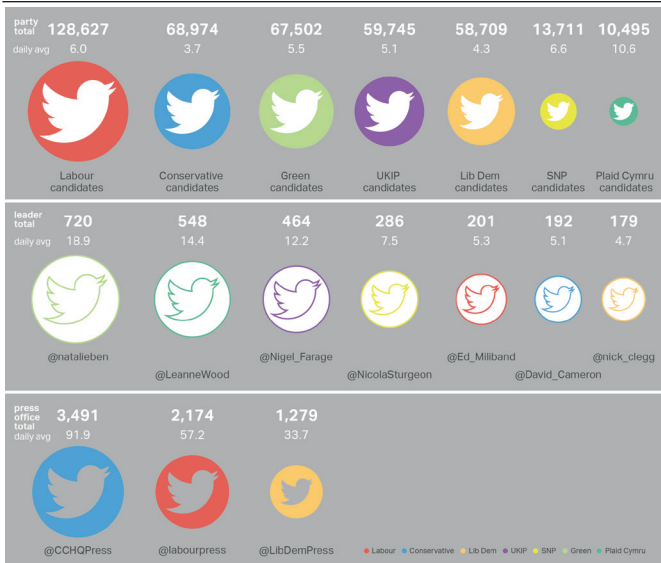
29 Rothwell, J., ‘Election 2015: Which party has won the social media war?’, *The Telegraph*, 6 May 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/generalelection-2015/11585233/Election-2015-Which-party-has-won-the-social-media-war.html> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

during the 2015 election campaign, this is not how the main parties used Twitter. Conservative and Labour candidates kept mostly to a script. Their tweeting was cautious, they rarely engaged in dialogue and they avoided controversial areas.

Their tweets tended to fall into one of three categories. They used Twitter to share party political messages – often tweeting campaign videos or posters, or – in the case of the Conservatives, facts from the ‘share the facts’ site. They used it to critique other parties’ policies and to show people that they were out canvassing.

Of the seven main political parties – Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, UKIP, Greens, SNP and Plaid Cymru – Plaid Cymru candidates were tweeting the most, at almost 11 tweets a day. Labour candidates were tweeting just over half that, at six a day, and Conservatives almost a third – at under four tweets a day. In total 497 Conservative candidates tweeted 68,974 times, and 560 Labour candidates tweeted 128,627 times (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Tweets by candidates, leaders and party press officers. Design by Soapbox



Twitter was rarely used for conversations, except to say hello, or to thank party supporters. On a typical day in April, for example, less than two per cent of tweets from Conservative candidates began with @ or .@ (40 out of 1,741).<sup>30</sup> The proportion was almost the same that day for Labour candidates, with 54 of 2,971 tweets beginning with @ or .@. Many began with 'Great to be at...' or 'Good to see...'.<sup>31</sup>

Tweets about political issues were generally consistent with top down messages. On 30 March the Conservative incumbent for the Redditch constituency, Karen Lumley MP, tweeted: 'Only a Conservative government can secure a better future for families in Redditch County <http://youtu.be/bLJoltj7QZE> [links to Conservative YouTube video]'.<sup>31</sup> Tweets criticising opposition policy frequently linked to party posters – the following was tweeted by multiple accounts: 'The price of Labour: £3,028 extra tax for every working family - <http://betterfutu.re/1MpbNT2> [links to sharing page for Conservative poster]'. Tweets about canvassing were positive, upbeat and bright: 'Out and about meeting people in East Brighton with my @bhlLabour team', Labour candidate Nancy Platts tweeted. 'Bright and sunny in Upper Bullington this morning' Caroline Nokes MP told her followers.<sup>32</sup>

Fifty nine per cent of all candidates' tweets were retweets, which gives an indication of how cautious they were. Where tweets contained a shortlink – a method of shortening URLs so that they can better fit into a 140 character tweet – this was most likely to be to another tweet, often by the party press office – or to YouTube. 15,585 political tweets by candidates linked to YouTube as against 3,556 that linked to the *Telegraph*.

<sup>30</sup> Replies on Twitter automatically begin with the profile name of the account being replied to (hence, they begin with the '@' which prefaces all Twitter usernames). Replies can be edited to be visible to all followers of any username mentioned in a tweet, by adding text at the beginning of the tweet. This is conventionally done by adding a full stop to the beginning so that the tweet begins '@'.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Lumley, @Tell\_Karen, 30 March 2015, [https://twitter.com/Tell\\_Karen/status/582591939087900672](https://twitter.com/Tell_Karen/status/582591939087900672).

<sup>32</sup> Caroline Nokes, @carolinenokes, 1 April 2015, <https://twitter.com/carolinenokes/status/583195526516105216/photo/1>.

On political issues, Conservative candidates appeared to be highly disciplined. 56 per cent of their tweets were about the economy (14,927 tweets). The next most tweeted about issue was health, at 13 per cent (2,492 tweets). Labour candidates also tweeted most about the economy (45 per cent of tweets), but were more likely to tweet about other political issues as well. 25 per cent of Labour tweets were about health and nine per cent about education.

The issues that candidates did not tweet about is as illuminating as those they did. Both Conservative and Labour candidates held off tweeting about immigration. Only 3 per cent of Conservative candidates' political tweets were about immigration, as were the same proportion of Labour candidates' tweets. Even when immigration became a subject of debate during the campaign the candidates did not comment on it on Twitter in substantially greater numbers.

In the fortnight from 13 April to 26 April, the UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, caused a storm during the TV 'Challengers' Debate' by alleging that foreigners came to the UK to be treated for HIV; Katie Hopkins triggered further controversy by comparing immigrants to cockroaches in a column in the *Sun* on 17 April;<sup>33</sup> and a migrant boat capsized in the Mediterranean, killing hundreds and sparking a migration debate across Europe. During this fortnight Conservative candidates published over 4,000 tweets about the economy, 288 each day on average. Over the same period they published just 197 tweets about immigration (14 per day). For Labour candidates the figures are 330 per day for the economy, and 16 per day for immigration. The number of tweets about immigration hardly moved despite Farage, Hopkins and the Mediterranean tragedy.

<sup>33</sup> Hopkins, K., 'Rescue boats? I'd use gunships to stop migrants', *The Sun*, 17 April 2015, <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/suncolumnists/katiehopkins/6414865/Katie-Hopkins-I-would-use-gunships-to-stop-migrants.html> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

Throughout the campaign Conservative and Labour candidates acted in a similarly controlled fashion on Twitter. This way they successfully avoided any political gaffes like that of Emily Thornberry in 2014. They also avoided the opportunity to use Twitter to engage in dialogue with voters, to demonstrate authenticity or as a means of building a personal support base.

### Party leaders and senior politicians on Twitter: On the campaign trail

Given how cautious and controlled the candidates were on Twitter, and how frequently they retweeted leaders and senior politicians, the Twitter feeds of the leaders and politicians are particularly instructive.

All seven party leaders tweeted on a daily basis. The leaders of the smaller parties tweeted more than those of the main parties. Natalie Bennett, the leader of the Greens tweeted the most, averaging 19 tweets a day. She was followed by Leanne Wood of Plaid Cymru at 14 tweets a day, and then Nigel Farage at 12 tweets a day, Nicola Sturgeon at eight tweets a day and Ed Miliband, David Cameron and Nick Clegg all at five tweets a day.

David Cameron's tweets had a consistent tone and message, probably best captured by his tweet on St George's day: 'let's all be proud of our country's great past – and confident about our future'.<sup>34</sup> Cameron frequently told his followers that Britain had achieved a lot since 2010, and that the Conservatives had a plan to secure and build on these achievements for the future.

The tweets documented Cameron's tour of the country – to Chippenham, Cheadle, Neasden, Addingham, Croydon, Wells, Bath and more. They often contained photographs of the Conservative leader visiting voters' homes, going to factories and seeing ongoing infrastructure projects (such

<sup>34</sup> David Cameron, @david\_cameron, 23 April 2015, [https://twitter.com/David\\_Cameron/status/591149885447139328](https://twitter.com/David_Cameron/status/591149885447139328).

as the Heysham to M6 roadlink). Closer to polling day he included more videos of speeches, following criticism that he had not shown enough passion during the campaign.

Ed Miliband's tweets were more policy related and less personal. There were more party pledges and commitments, and fewer photographs. Miliband made commitments on the minimum wage, zero hours contracts, nurses, midwives and doctors, rent capping, house building, tuition fees and more. His messages tended to be more reserved: 'We are a great country' he tweeted on 13 April, 'but we can be better'.<sup>35</sup>

Nicola Sturgeon, unlike the two main party leaders, occasionally engaged in dialogue. On 3 April she tweeted at the *Telegraph* journalist who had written a story claiming evidence that Sturgeon would really prefer Cameron as Prime Minister: '@simon\_telegraph your story is categorically, 100%, untrue...which I'd have told you if you'd asked me at any point today'.<sup>36</sup> This was retweeted almost 5,000 times.

Sturgeon was praised for her use of Twitter by Twitter themselves. Referring to the tweet at the *Telegraph*, Bruce Daisley, VP of European Operations at Twitter, said; 'She responded immediately and stopped it becoming a major news item, and certainly making a news item on mainstream TV'.<sup>37</sup>

Nigel Farage's tweets were often more conversational than other leaders – 'Even popping into a petrol station at night yields selfies!'.<sup>38</sup> Like Natalie Bennett he would often tweet about appearances on broadcast media. Retweets partly

<sup>35</sup> Ed Miliband, @ed\_miliband, 13 April 2015, [https://twitter.com/Ed\\_Miliband/status/587552839142084608](https://twitter.com/Ed_Miliband/status/587552839142084608)

<sup>36</sup> Nicola Sturgeon, @NicolaSturgeon, 3 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/NicolaSturgeon/status/584094997890359297>.

<sup>37</sup> Sweeney, M., 'Nicola Sturgeon is 'superb' on Twitter, says platform's European chief', *The Guardian*, 28 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/apr/28/nicola-sturgeon-twitter-snp> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Nigel Farage, @nigel\_farage, 1 April 2015 [https://twitter.com/Nigel\\_Farage/status/594275566322327552/photo/1](https://twitter.com/Nigel_Farage/status/594275566322327552/photo/1).



account for the volume of tweets by Natalie Bennett and Leanne Wood of Plaid Cymru, who would often retweet messages by their parties or party colleagues.

Conservative Chancellor George Osborne's campaign Twitter feed showed two quite distinct phases. For the first three weeks of the campaign he tweeted a handful of times a day, chiefly to promote a Conservative policy or tell his followers where he was. Then for the fortnight from Monday 20 April he started tweeting dozens of times a day. These were not retweets, nor were they general policy statements. They were geographically specific and clear investment commitments mostly related to transport.

'We will improve junction 25 of M5, upgrade Devon link road, start planning new station between Castle Cary & Taunton' Osborne tweeted on Monday 27 April.<sup>39</sup> 'We'll commit to improving the A628, and also the A160 and A180 near Immingham port #First100days' he tweeted on Wednesday 29 April.<sup>40</sup> And on Friday 1 May, 'We'll also commit to upgrade M42/M40 interchange to provide better access to the A45 Birmingham airport and the planned HS2 station'.<sup>41</sup>

The tweets appeared to be grouped by geographic area. On Monday 27 April a batch of 19 tweets were aimed at the south west, followed by a dozen to the East Midlands and Northamptonshire. On Wednesday the focus was on Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire. On Thursday on the east of England and London. On Friday the tweets were about the north west and West Midlands, and then on Saturday they were directed at the south coast.

39 George Osborne, @george\_osborne, 27 April 2015, [https://twitter.com/George\\_Osborne/status/592685094499913729](https://twitter.com/George_Osborne/status/592685094499913729).

40 George Osborne, @george\_osborne, 29 April 2015, [https://twitter.com/George\\_Osborne/status/593405790515556352](https://twitter.com/George_Osborne/status/593405790515556352).

41 George Osborne, @george\_osborne, 1 May 2015 [https://twitter.com/George\\_Osborne/status/594081587769270272](https://twitter.com/George_Osborne/status/594081587769270272).

It is beyond the scope of this report to research whether these commitments were picked up by local candidates and the local press, but it is clear that the Twitter feed was being used to target concrete investments at particular geographic areas and projects in the days leading up to 7 May.

### Party press offices on Twitter: 21st century spin rooms

While the candidates were mostly restrained and cautious, the party press offices were noisy and antagonistic. The Conservative press office (@CCHQPress) was particularly prolific, tweeting an average of 92 times a day. Labour (@labourpress) was slightly less active, tweeting 57 times a day (perhaps because @UKLabour was also busy). The LibDem press office (@LibDemPress) was more reserved at only 34 tweets a day. Other parties tweeted from party rather than press accounts.

The Twitter feeds of the party press offices read like 21st century spin rooms. Throughout each day they pushed out positive messages about the party, negative messages about the opposition and links to those doing the same. The Twitter accounts were used for rapid rebuttal, to promote new election posters and videos, and to try to frame the language of debates.

From the start of the campaign @CCHQPress hailed the achievements of the Conservatives, tweeting regularly about common themes: how the Conservatives had halved the deficit, put two million more people in work, and doubled the number of apprenticeships. These positive tweets were interspersed with statements about the incompetence of Labour, chiefly based on their previous economic record.

There was a lot of repetition in the language that @CCHQPress used. Recurring phrases included statements that the Conservatives were 'competent', 'in control', and had a 'long term economic plan'. The same narrative said Labour had 'wrecked' the economy, was 'anti-business' and wanted 'more borrowing and higher taxes'. Much of

the Twitter feed's criticism was directed at Ed Miliband and Ed Balls who were, @CCHQPress said, as bad at economic management as their predecessors. These themes were made not just in the tweets themselves but in hashtags. Those regularly used by @CCHQPress included #sticktotheplan #securetherecovery #longtermplan and #CameroninCharge. When criticising Labour the hashtags included #sameoldlabour #chaos #milishambles and #justnotuptoit.

Occasionally @CCHQPress became aggressive and personal. 'Are you tired, @Ed\_Miliband?' @CCHQPress tweeted on 27 March, 'Dancing for Alex Salmond AND Len McCluskey must be exhausting?'<sup>42</sup> Or at *Daily Mirror* journalist James Beattie on 20 March, '@JBeattieMirror funny you've not Tweeted your pg2 story - where you claim 0.07% of Cllrs is "1 in 3" - stopped even factchecking Labour PR?'<sup>43</sup> Or at Douglas Carswell – who defected from the Conservative Party to UKIP in 2014 – 'What happened @DouglasCarswell? Did you get cold feet? #LastMinutePullOut #bbcdp', when it appeared Carswell was no longer taking part in that day's *Daily Politics* show.<sup>44</sup>

Labour's press office did not tweet as much as the Conservatives, nor did it appear to exercise the same degree of discipline with regard to content or timing. Often @LabourPress was on the defensive, responding to what they described as 'Tory lies' about Labour's policies on taxation and public spending. But as the campaign progressed, notably after the non domicile policy announcement on 8 April, @LabourPress appeared to become more confident and more ready to attack the Conservatives.

42 @CCHQPress, 27 March 2015 <https://twitter.com/CCHQPress/status/581493401289404417>.

43 @CCHQPress, 20 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/CCHQPress/status/590057838434770944>

44 @CCHQPress, 21 April 2015, <https://twitter.com/CCHQPress/status/590502657619578880/photo/1>.

The Labour press office attempted to turn many of @CCHQPress' phrases and themes back on the Conservatives, accusing the Conservatives of making unfunded promises, of poor economic management and of their campaign being in chaos. '#SameOldTories', @labourpress tweeted. There was even the odd altercation between press offices as they goaded one another.<sup>45</sup>

@LabourPress was never as consistent as the @CCHQPress, partly because the Labour campaign was never as narrowly focused as that of the Conservatives. In the week beginning 20 April, @LabourPress reported that Labour would be focusing on the NHS, and the same day launched both a Green manifesto and a disabilities manifesto.<sup>46</sup>

The party press offices on Twitter may not have led the agenda, but that did not appear to be their chief purpose. They were mainly a channel for party political messages, and sought to foster negative perceptions about the opposition.

### 'Below the line' campaigning

Any study of media and the election naturally focuses on open sources of media – broadcast, press and social media. Yet increasingly new media tools have been used by political actors to target voters privately and directly, for example via email or through Facebook.

Labour embraced an email fundraising strategy pioneered in the US and achieved, reportedly, considerable success. According to the *Financial Times*, Labour's 'income from small donations... amounted to £3.7 million in 2014. This included 40,000 small donations from 23,000 members made in response to letters and phone calls — as well as

45 @LabourPress, 14 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/labourpress/status/587949332554461185>

46 Labour Party, *Labour's Green Plan*, 20 April 2015, <http://action.labour.org.uk/page/-/150419%20Labour%20Green%20Plan%20FINAL%2003.pdf> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

thousands more from small online donations'.<sup>47</sup>

The Conservatives used Facebook to target specific marginal voters. Jim Messina, President Obama's campaign manager in 2012 who was hired by the Conservatives for the UK 2015 campaign, gave an interview to the *Times* after the election, explaining the party's use of social media:

'The Conservative campaign, borrowing micro-targeting techniques from the US, was so sophisticated that in the final week the party was having multiple contacts via Facebook, phone and on the doorstep with individual voters who had been identified as likely to switch from the Liberal Democrats or choose the Tories over Labour.'[...] Facebook was the crucial weapon; using data which the social media site sells to advertisers, he was able to target key constituencies and get to niche groups of voters.'<sup>48</sup>

By the end of 2014, before the long campaign had even started, the Conservatives were spending more than £100,000 a month on Facebook, the BBC discovered.<sup>49</sup>

Micro-targeting, by email and social media, underlines the difficulty of assessing the impact of the media on modern elections and emphasises the growing complexity of electoral communication research. Twitter can provide an insight into the messages the parties are seeking to convey, and can be used to target specific commitments (as with Osborne's tweets), but provides no indication of how private platforms like Facebook are being used.

47 Pickard, J., 'General election: donation data reveal Labour's reliance on unions', *Financial Times*, 16 April 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/34ed154a-e38c-11e4-b407-00144feab7de.html> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

48 Taylor, D., 'Tories knew they would win election three weeks before vote', *The Times*, 13 May 2015, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article4438656.ece> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

49 Hawkins, R., 'Tories' £100,000 a month Facebook bill', *BBC News*, 5 February 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-31141547> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

## 7 | News media and the 2015 General Election



# 7 | News media and the 2015 General Election

## A compliant press?

National news outlets for the most part accepted that the campaign would be fought around the economy. This was the issue on which both main parties, the Conservatives in particular, concentrated their communications, and the national news outlets followed their lead. Almost a third (31 per cent) of articles about any policy area, or 7,967 articles on national news sites, referred to the economy over the course of the official campaign from Monday 30 March up to Wednesday 6 May (See Figure 2). This compares with just over 11 per cent of articles that referred to health (2,897 articles) and 10 per cent that referred to education (2,494 articles).

Figure 3 shows that reports and commentary about the economy focused first on spending cuts (1,351 articles), then on economic growth (921) and cutting the deficit (675 articles). These were all issues about which the Conservatives spoke regularly and had consistent messaging. Less covered were some of the issues Labour wanted to emphasise, notably zero hours (445 articles), mansion tax (339 articles) and non domicile status (322 articles).

The economic agenda in national news outlets tended to follow the parties' lead, chiefly that of the Conservatives. On the first day of the official campaign, for example, the *Times* led with 'Labour Will Raise Tax Bill By £3,000, Says Cameron'. This followed a claim first made by the Conservatives in a dossier released in January 2015, 'A Cost Analysis of Labour Party Policy' which was then re-released for the official campaign under the title '£3,028:

Figure 2: Policy issues in online news articles, 30 March – 6 May. Design by Soapbox

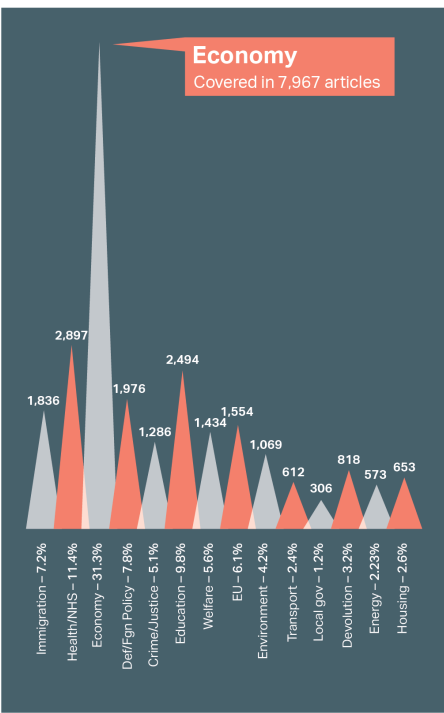


Figure 3: Most common topics in articles featuring the economy, 30 March - 6 May. Design by Soapbox

Spending cuts			Tax avoidance	
			380	
Economic growth			Mansion tax	
			339	
Cutting the deficit			Non-dom(s)	
			322	
Zero hour(s)			Corporation tax	
			240	
Unempl-oyment			Economic recovery	
			194	

Labour's Tax Rise for Every Working Household'.<sup>50 51</sup>  
The Conservative claim also featured in the *Sun* and the *Express*.<sup>52 53</sup>

It was symptomatic of Labour's difficulties finding supportive coverage in anything but a handful of papers, that on the first day of the official campaign they paid for an advertisement in the *Financial Times*. The full page advert warned of the threat to UK business of a British exit of the EU. Labour would struggle for coverage of its economic proposals in the press throughout the campaign, with the exception of its non domicile announcement. For the most part, the press seemed more willing to publish Conservative announcements, sometimes almost verbatim.

On Friday 10 April the *Times* led its front page with the news that 'Tories freeze rail fares as Labour edges ahead'. The first sentence of the article reported the news as a party press office might have written it: 'Rail fares will be frozen in real terms over the next five years under Conservative plans to prevent more than 250,000 commuters being ripped off at the ticket office'.<sup>54</sup>

On Wednesday 29 April the *Telegraph* led its front page with 'Cameron's Pledge: No Tax Rises For Five Years'. Again the first sentence read like a press office announcement: 'There will be no VAT, national insurance or income tax rises for the next five years under a Conservative government, David Cameron will announce

50 Conservative Party, *A Cost Analysis of Labour Party Policy*, 5 January 2015, <https://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/LabourCostAnalysis.ashx> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

51 Conservative Party, £3,028: Labour's Tax Rise for Every Working Household, 24 March 2015, <https://www.conservatives.com/~media/sharethefacts/3028> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

52 Newton Dunn, T., 'PM: Ed will hike tax £14 a week', *The Sun*, 30 March 2015, <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/politics/6390273/David-Cameron-claims-everyhousehold-will-pay-1450-a-week-more-tax-under-Labour.html> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

53 Little, A., 'Labour plans £3,000 tax bombshell on families to fund spending', *Express*, 29 March 2015, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/567152/Labourplan-tax-families-3-000-spending-David-Cameron> (Accessed 1 August 2015).

54 Paton, G, Elliot, F., 'Tories freeze rail fares as Labour edges ahead', *The Times*, 10 April 2015

today as he vows to enshrine the Tory pledge in law'.<sup>55</sup>

Other front page leads announcing or backing Conservative policy included: 'Osborne's Housing Revolution' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 5 April), 'Tories: Give £1m To Your Children Tax-Free' (*Daily Mail*, 12 April) 'Maggie's 'Right To Buy' Dream Is Back' (*Express*, 14 April), 'We Are The True Party Of Working People' (*Telegraph*, 14 April), 'Happy Ever Grafter' (*Sun*, 15 April), and 'White Van Dan: Cam's My Man' (*Sun*, 28 April). Over the course of the campaign, there were 80 national newspaper front page leads that supported the Conservative position.

There were 30 newspaper front page leads that were sympathetic to Labour. These tended to be less overtly supportive than the Conservative leads, and were often linked to an interview. The *Guardian*, for example, led with an interview with Labour campaign adviser David Axelrod on 18 April; 'Tories Are "Panic-stricken" Says Top Miliband Adviser'. The *Independent* led with 'Miliband's £7.5bn Game Changer' on Sunday 12 April, based on an exclusive interview with the Labour leader. The *Mirror* led with 'My Pledge' on the day of the Labour manifesto launch, again based on an exclusive Miliband interview.

Of Labour's economic announcements during the campaign – on tax avoidance, the minimum wage, zero hours contracts, rent capping, tuition fees – only one gained traction across the political spectrum; the commitment to cancel non domicile tax status. This led not just the *Guardian* and the *Independent* front pages on 8 April but also those of the *Times* and the *Financial Times*. In response, the Conservative MP and Secretary of State for Defence Michael Fallon wrote a personal attack on the Labour leader in the *Times*: 'Ed Miliband stabbed his own brother in the back to become Labour leader. Now he is willing to stab the

55 Swinford, S., 'Election 2015: David Cameron pledges five-year tax lock', *The Telegraph*, 29 April 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/davidcameron/11569593/Election-2015-David-Cameron-pledges-5-year-tax-lock.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

United Kingdom in the back to become prime minister.<sup>56</sup> This bid to change the subject was ultimately successful. ‘To be fair,’ Stephen Tall tweeted, ‘Michael Fallon’s tactic of getting people to stop talking about non-doms has worked. At great cost to his cred, but still’.<sup>57</sup>

## Co-ordinating news agendas

There were instances during the campaign when parties appeared to work with the press to coordinate their news agendas. All party leaders granted exclusive interviews to newspapers and many wrote editorials, but the Conservatives appeared to work particularly closely with certain newspapers.

The *Sun*, for example, enjoyed close access to the Conservative leadership and senior politicians. For example, David Cameron spent a day with the *Sun*.<sup>58</sup> Boris Johnson did the same, spending the day campaigning with *SunNation* (the *Sun*’s non-paywalled political site, set up especially for the election campaign). Neither interview was based around questioning the candidates on policy issues, but rather to emphasise how human and popular they were. Of Boris, the *Sun*’s political editor Tom Newton Dunn wrote; ‘everywhere he went to woo voters for the local Tory candidates, his instantly recognisable blonde mop drew crowds, car horn honks and friendly banter’.<sup>59</sup>

When George Osborne announced schemes to help people buy a home, the *Telegraph* published an admiring and complimentary interview with the Conservative

Chancellor that harked back to the deferential approach of the journalism of the 1950s. Replete with photographs of Osborne making tea in the homes of people he has helped, the piece focused on the Chancellor’s close friendship with David Cameron and his enthusiasm to support homebuyers. None of the questions Osborne was asked were challenging. Notably, the interview concludes with questions including: ‘Does the Chancellor agree’, the article asked, ‘with Mr Cameron that he would make a fine leader of the party and PM one day?’<sup>60</sup>

There were occasions on which there appeared to be careful synchronisation between the Conservatives and the press. On Saturday 4 April, for example, The *Sun* published a front page exclusive, ‘Kids Web Porn Axe’. The story described how the Conservatives, if re-elected, would introduce laws to lock out under 18 year olds from porn sites. On the same day as the *Sun*’s exclusive the *Daily Mail* published a piece on the same policy, alongside a piece by Conservative former Culture Secretary Sajid Javid, ‘writing exclusively for MailOnline’.<sup>61</sup> Javid’s piece was also posted on the Conservatives’ Facebook page.<sup>62</sup> Javid tweeted the *Daily Mail* story first thing that morning,<sup>63</sup> and David Cameron tweeted the Javid Facebook post a few hours later.<sup>64</sup>

On Monday 27 April the *Telegraph* led with ‘An exclusive letter to the Telegraph from 5,000 small business owners’ calling for the re-election of David Cameron and George

56 Fallon, M., ‘This unholy alliance would put Britain’s security in jeopardy’, *The Times*, 9 April 2015, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/thunderer/article4405666.ece> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

57 Stephen Tall, @stephentall, 9 April 2015, <https://twitter.com/stephentall/status/586088438216155136>.

58 SunNation, ‘Cam Cam: See Life Through PM’s Eyes in our World Exclusive Video’, *SunNation*, 18 April 2015, <http://www.sunnation.co.uk/david-cameron-day-in-a-life-videosunnation-exclusive/> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

59 Newton Dunn, T., ‘Three Marginals, 470 Miles and 164 Selfies: This is Campaigning, Boris-Style’, *SunNation*, 1 May 2015, <http://www.sunnation.co.uk/three-marginals-470-miles-and-164-selfies-campaigning-boris-style/> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

60 Ross, T., ‘George Osborne’s ‘housing revolution’ election pledge’, *The Telegraph*, 4 April 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/11515683/George-Osbornes-housing-revolution-election-pledge.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

61 Chapman, J., ‘Tide of internet sleaze to be halted: Victory for express as Tories pledge age ban on porn sites’, *Daily Mail*, 4 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3025201/Tide-internet-sleaze-halted-Victory-Mail-Tories-pledge-age-ban-porn-sites.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

62 Facebook.com/Conservatives, 4 April 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/conservatives/posts/10153019828284279>

63 Sajid Javid, @sajidjavid, 4 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/sajidjavid/status/584221399180541952>.

64 David Cameron, @david\_cameron, 4 April 2015, [https://twitter.com/David\\_Cameron/status/584268565370560512](https://twitter.com/David_Cameron/status/584268565370560512).

Osborne. The letter appeared, to the reader, to have been sent to the *Telegraph* by the small businesses themselves. Yet, it subsequently turned out that the letter had been organised by the Conservative party.<sup>65</sup> This was discovered when the metadata of the PDF of the letter posted on the *Telegraph* website was revealed to show that it had been authored by CCHQ. The Conservatives did not admit to collaborating with the *Telegraph* over the letter, nor did the *Telegraph*, which subsequently made a number of unadmitted amendments to the list. The role Twitter played in the discovery of the letter and its signatories is described later.

It is hard to find a more intimate and opaque example of collaboration between the press and a political party in the 2015 campaign, though there was a more blatant open example: On Friday 17 April the *Express* led with the story that Richard Desmond, the paper's owner, was giving £1.3 million to UKIP.

## A partisan press

To some extent, the Conservatives need not have worried about co-ordinating closely with the press, since most newspapers had decided who they wanted to win the election long before the campaign started.

From Monday January 5 to Sunday 3 May there were 1,050 leader columns in the national press that expressed a positive or negative view of one or other of the political parties. 40 per cent of these expressed a view about the Conservatives (424 articles) and another 40 per cent a view about Labour. Yet, while more than half the leader columns that expressed a view about the Conservatives were positive (51 per cent), only 21 per cent of articles about Labour were positive.

<sup>65</sup> Watt, N. and Mason, R., 'How the Conservatives orchestrated the letter from business leaders – and got it wrong', *The Guardian*, 27 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/apr/27/how-the-conservatives-orchestrateletters-from-business-leaders> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

The majority of Labour-supporting leaders were published in the *Mirror* – 55 (out of a total of 87) in total between January and May. The *Guardian* and *Mirror* combined accounted for 85 per cent of positive leader articles about Labour.

The *Telegraph* was the most supportive of the Conservatives, publishing 55 leader articles in support. The *Daily Mail* followed this with 49, followed by the *Express* with 36, the *Sun* with 35 and the *Times* with 34.

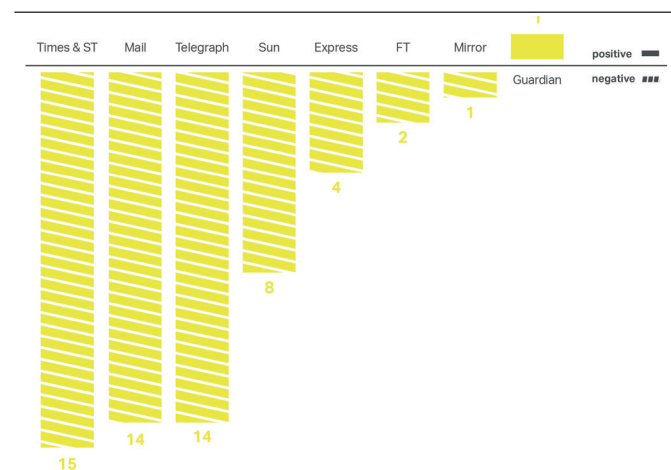
When it came to negative leader articles about Labour, the *Sun* led the way with 102. This exceeded the *Daily Mail's* 75 anti Labour leaders, the *Telegraph's* 67, the *Times's* 39 and the *Express's* 33. More than half the negative leader articles about the Conservatives were published in the *Mirror* (109), and 44 more in the *Guardian*. Overall, on the basis of leader columns, the *Mirror* was the most partisan paper, with 109 anti Conservative and 55 pro Labour leaders.

An *Independent* report claimed that Rupert Murdoch, frustrated that the *Sun* had not been critical enough of Labour, berated its journalists in late February 2015. 'Rupert made it very clear he was unhappy with the Sun's coverage of the election' the *Independent* reported, 'He instructed them to be much more aggressive in their attacks on Labour and more positive about Conservative achievements in the run-up to polling day'. The paper's partisanship intensified during the subsequent official campaign.<sup>66</sup>

Proportionally, the greatest opprobrium was reserved for the SNP. Over the course of official campaign – from 30 March to 6 May – there were, in total, 59 leader articles in the national press which expressed a view about the SNP. 58 of these were negative (Figure 4).

<sup>66</sup> Sherwin, A. and Wright, O., 'Rupert Murdoch berated Sun journalists for not doing enough to attack Ed Miliband and stop him winning the general election', *The Independent*, 21 April 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/rupert-murdoch-berated-sun-journalists-for-not-doing-enough-to-attack-ed-miliband-10191005.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

**Figure 4:** Newspaper leader columns - mentions of the SNP, 30 March - 6 May. Design by Soapbox



Whether by accident or design, many papers even adopted similar language to the Conservatives. The *Daily Mail* characterised Labour as a 'divisive, high tax, spending and borrowing government which would send Britain lurching back to the chaos of 2010'.<sup>67</sup> A *Telegraph* leader stated 'Labour's anti-business rhetoric represents a flight back to the 1970s'.<sup>68</sup>

Readers could therefore have been in little doubt about the political position of their paper. Yet it was the negative reporting in the press, and particularly the negative personal reporting, that gave the 2015 UK election campaign a rancorous and spiteful tone.

67 Daily Mail Comment, 'Red Ed's politics of the banana republic', *Daily Mail*, 28 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3058349/DAILY-MAIL-COMMENT-Red-Ed-s-politics-banana-republic.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

68 Telegraph View, 'There would be no good life under Labour', *The Telegraph*, 25 April 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/11561789/There-would-be-no-good-life-under-Labour.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

Within days of the official campaign beginning, Nicola Sturgeon had been labeled 'The most dangerous woman in Britain'.<sup>69</sup> This was how she was portrayed across much of the UK press for the remainder of the campaign, as a power hungry Lady Macbeth character, trying to act as kingmaker. The *Sun* parodied a Miley Cyrus music video, Photoshopping Sturgeon's head onto the body of the singer straddling a wrecking ball. The *Daily Mail* called her a 'glamorous power-dressing imperatrix'.<sup>70</sup> Amanda Platell, also in the *Daily Mail*, wrote that she 'would make Hilary Clinton look human'.<sup>71</sup>

Yet the personal attacks on Sturgeon paled in comparison to those leveled at Ed Miliband. These started long before the official campaign. In February 2015, *Guardian* columnist Roy Greenslade was already writing that the criticism of Miliband was equivalent to 'Michael Foot plus Neil Kinnock plus Gordon Brown and then some'.<sup>72</sup> Over subsequent weeks he was accused of being a 'sanctimonious hypocrite' of 'vaunting quasi-Marxist ambition'.<sup>73</sup>

69 Chapman, J., 'Is this the most dangerous woman in Britain? Nicola Sturgeon tells Red Ed: 'We'll call the shots now' as it's claimed she would rather see Cameron win election', *Daily Mail*, 3 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3024983/SNP-s-Nicola-Sturgeon-tells-Ed-Miliband-II-call-shots-now.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

70 Deerin, C., 'Nicola Sturgeon is the woman who now holds all the aces in the General Election', *Daily Mail*, 3 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3025028/Nicola-Sturgeon-woman-holds-aces-General-Election-writes-CHRIS-DEERIN.html> (Accessed 2 April 2015).

71 Platell, A., 'Why we women can't stand Nicola Sturgeon', *Daily Mail*, 18 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3044355/PLATELL-S-PEOPLE-women-tstand-Sturgeon.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

72 Greenslade, R., 'Ed Miliband suffers ferocious press onslaught – and it will get worse', *The Guardian*, 2 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2015/feb/02/ed-miliband-suffers-ferocious-press-onslaught-and-it-will-get-worse> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

73 Platell, A., 'Miliband's sickening betrayal of Milly Dowler', *Daily Mail*, 14 February 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2953178/Amanda-Platellsays-Ed-Miliband-sickeningly-betrayed-Milly-Dowler.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).



a tax avoider,<sup>74</sup> a land grabber, a Stalinist,<sup>75</sup> a gormless,<sup>76</sup> dangerous 'backstabber'.<sup>77</sup>

Amongst a crowded field, it is difficult to find a piece more vituperative than one by Sarah Vine in the *Daily Mail* shortly before the official campaign titled 'Why their kitchen tells you all you need to know about the mirthless Milibands... and why there's nothing to suggest that Ed and Justine are not, in fact, aliens.'<sup>78</sup> Reporting on an interview the Milibands did with the BBC's James Landale (David Cameron did a corresponding one with Landale in his own kitchen as part of a series of party leader interviews), Vine ends her article: 'A Britain made in the image of that sad, self-consciously modest Miliband kitchen: bland, functional, humourless, cold and about as much fun to live in as a Communist era housing block in Minsk.'

This was an extreme version of much of the press narrative about Ed Miliband. He was cast as an unreconstructed Marxist who wanted high taxes, high borrowing and excessive debt, and who aimed to take the UK back to the 1970s. 'On-the-buses' Miliband', the *Telegraph* called him, a reference that must have seemed

74 Daily Mail Comment, 'Tax avoidance and Red Ed's hypocrisy', *Daily Mail*, 13 February 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2951756/DAILY-MAIL-COMMENT-Tax-avoidance-Red-Ed-s-hypocrisy.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

75 Martin, D., Chesters, L. and Eccles, L., 'Miliband the Land-Grabber: Red Ed' threat to confiscate unused land branded 'Stalinist' as backlash grows over his plans to control property market', *Daily Mail*, 27 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3058171/Miliband-Land-Grabber-Red-Ed-s-threat-confiscateunused-land-branded-Stalinist-backlash-grows-plans-control-property-market.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

76 Letts, Q., 'Bojo turned on Red Ed like a fat Labrador: Quentin Letts watched Boris savage 'Backstabber' Miliband', *Daily Mail*, 27 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3056738/A-light-lit-Bojo-s-bean-savaged-Ed-QUENTINLETTs-watches-Boris-v-Backstabber.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

77 Tominey, C., 'The ugly truth about Ed Miliband', *Express*, 26 April 2015, <http://www.express.co.uk/comment/columnists/camilla-tominey/572991/Camilla-Tominey-The-ugly-truth-about-Ed-Miliband-Milifandom> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

78 Vine, S., 'Why their kitchen tells you all you need to know about the mirthless Milibands...', *Daily Mail*, 12 March 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2990810/Why-kitchen-tells-need-know-mirthless-Milibands-s-suggest-Ed-Justine-not-fact-aliens.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

quite foreign to anyone under the age of 40.<sup>79</sup> His character was derided, his wife was criticised and he was slated for 'weaponising' his wife and children for political purposes.<sup>80</sup>

David Cameron did not escape personal abuse either. 'Why are you such a chicken Mr Cameron?' the *Mirror* asked when the Prime Minister refused to engage in a head to head debate with Ed Miliband.<sup>81</sup> Accused of oozing 'the fake sincerity of a conman who will rob you blind while pretending he's got an unbeatable offer', Cameron was presented as nasty, elitist, and more interested in increasing the wealth of his friends and supporters than helping the hard working poor.

With the exception of the *Daily Star*, which published minimal political news, The *Sun* and the *Mirror* had the most personalised coverage over the long campaign. 52 per cent of political articles published in the *Sun* between 5 January and 12 April that referred to a political party also referred to its leader. Half of those in the *Mirror* did the same. By contrast only a third of those on the *BBC News* site were personalised in this way. When writing about Labour the *Sun* was much more likely to personalise the coverage – Miliband appeared in 61 per cent of all articles about Labour, while Cameron appeared in 47 per cent of articles about the Conservatives. Similarly, the *Mirror* was more personal when writing about the Conservatives (57 per cent contained Cameron), than about Labour (43 per cent had Miliband). Given the political stance of each of these papers, their criticism appears to have been much more personalised than their praise.

The personalisation of the campaign in the press did not appear to harm Ed Miliband's approval ratings. Rather,

79 Telegraph View, 'Ticket to disaster with 'On the Buses' Miliband', *The Telegraph*, 28 April 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ed-miliband/11565983/Ticket-to-disaster-with-On-the-Buses-Miliband.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

80 Pearson, A., 'Now Ed Miliband wants to 'weaponise' his wife', *The Telegraph*, 11 March 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ed-miliband/11464815/Now-Ed-Miliband-wants-to-weaponise-his-wife.html> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

81 *Daily Mirror* front page, 6 March 2015 <https://www.facebook.com/dailymirror/photos/a.394365354161.172272.6149699161/10153164246919162/>.

despite the vilification in many papers, his approval ratings, as measured by YouGov, rose from a low of -56 in late 2014, up to -18 by the middle of April 2015.<sup>82</sup>

### Few press surprises

The press rarely broke new ground during the campaign. Almost all the major political stories came from the parties themselves. The most surprising political story came on the eve of the official campaign when David Cameron told the BBC that, should he be re-elected, he would not run for a third term.<sup>83</sup> Another prominent political story, that the SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon would prefer David Cameron to be Prime Minister over Ed Miliband came from a leak from Alistair Carmichael, the former Liberal Democrat Secretary of State for Scotland, and was mis-reported by the *Telegraph*.<sup>84</sup>

The *Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* reported on the Conservative party co-chairman's alleged editing of the Wikipedia pages of himself and his colleagues. It accused Grant Shapps, or someone acting on his behalf, of changing his own pages to edit out unfavorable information, and of adding unflattering information to the pages of senior politicians in his own party. Shapps said the reports were 'categorically false and defamatory'.<sup>85</sup> Wikipedia later ruled that there was no definitive evidence linking Shapps to edits of his profile.<sup>86</sup>

The *Daily Mail* tried to shift the focus to immigration in week four of the campaign. 'Voters tell Cameron to act on migration', the paper's front page reported on Thursday 23 April.<sup>87</sup> The article focused on the findings of a report by Ipsos MORI that satisfaction with the government's handling of immigration was low while concern remained high.<sup>88</sup> The following day the paper continued its focus on migration combined with an attack on Labour, 'Miliband Will Bring Back Uncontrolled Migration'.<sup>89</sup> Neither front page, nor associated editorials, successfully moved the campaign agenda to focus on migration.

The failure of the press to break the parties' grip on the campaign agenda was partly due to the message discipline of the parties themselves, and partly due to many newspapers' inability or unwillingness to circumvent that control. In this carefully-choreographed and policed election campaign it would have required significant and sustained effort to shift the campaign agenda away from the terrain chosen by the main parties. The agenda could, however, be disrupted in part by social media.

82 YouGov, *Leaders – Approval*, 22 April 2015, <https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus/uploads/document/nh4tayipg2/YG-Archives-Pol-Trackers-Leaders-Approval-180415.pdf> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

83 BBC News, 'David Cameron 'won't serve third term' if elected', *BBC News*, 24 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-32022484> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

84 Independent Press Standards Organisation, 'IPSO rulings: 02572-15 Office of the First Minister v The Daily Telegraph', 10 June 2015, <https://www.ipso.co.uk/IPSO/rulings/IPSORulings-detail.html?id=179> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

85 Ramesh, R., 'Grant Shapps accused of editing Wikipedia pages of Tory rivals', *The Guardian*, 21 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/apr/21/grant-shapps-accused-of-editing-wikipedia-pages-of-tory-rivals> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

86 Ramesh, R., 'Wikipedia: account at centre of row 'not linked' to Grant Shapps', *The Guardian*, 9 June 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jun/09/wikipedia-account-at-centre-of-row-not-linked-to-grant-shapps> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

87 Slack, J., Groves, J. and Drury, I., 'Voters tell Cameron to act on immigration: barely one in ten say they are satisfied with border policies as Tories switch to Ukip', *Daily Mail*, 22 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3050990/Blow-Cameron-major-survey-shows-barely-one-10-voters-happyhandling-immigration.html> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

88 Ipsos MORI, 'First results from major longitudinal survey on attitudes to immigration', 22 April 2015, <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3559/First-results-from-major-longitudinalsurvey-on-attitudes-to-immigration.aspx> (Accessed 29 July 2015).

89 Chapman, J., 'Miliband will bring back uncontrolled migration: Stark warning from Cameron as he urges Ukip voters not to hand Labour power', *Daily Mail*, 23 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3053043/Miliband-bringuncontrolled-migration-Mail-urges-speak-PM-s-stark-warning.html> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

## 8 | Twitter users and the 2015 campaign



# 8 | Twitter users and the 2015 campaign

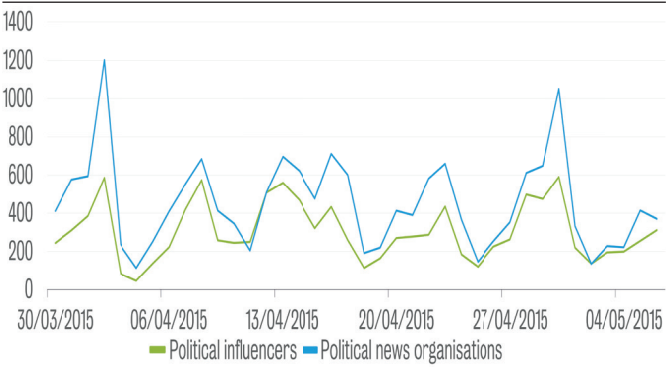
## Political influencers

Whilst many news sources may have been happy to replicate certain parties' campaigns, political influencers on Twitter were not. Influencers on Twitter did not set the political agenda during the campaign, but they did in many cases attempt to subvert it.

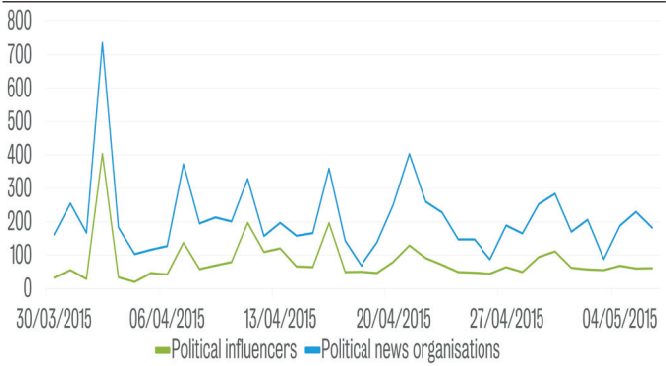
As set out in the methods section, for the purposes of this research we identified 309 'political influencers' on Twitter based on a combination of certain criteria including: number of followers; number of accounts followed; Klout score; and frequency and content of tweets. Over three quarters of these influencers were journalists, many of them writing for mainstream media organisations. Another six per cent were writers or bloggers. The rest came from the worlds of politics (although not parliamentary candidates who were analysed separately), public relations, academia, entertainment, polling organisations and think tanks. All had more than 5,000 followers. On average they had over 80,000 – as compared to incumbent candidates who had fewer than 15,000 followers on average, or candidates who were challenging for seats who typically had fewer than 2,000.

The news agendas of political influencers mapped closely to that of mainstream media. Comparing a timeline of tweets about the economy by political influencers with a timeline of tweets by organisations tweeting political news (chiefly news organisations and political parties) it is possible to see how closely the two parallel one another (Figure 5). Similarly, Figure 6 shows tweets by political influencers about health and tweeting by organisations. The topography of the two is also closely aligned.

**Figure 5:** Tweets on economy; political influencers vs political news organisations, 30 March - 6 May



**Figure 6:** Tweets on NHS/health; political influencers vs political news organisations, 30 March - 6 May



This alignment suggests that political influencers may have been responding to the mainstream news agenda rather than leading it. Of 146,195 tweets sent by political influencers over the official campaign, 51,367 – or 35 per cent – contained links. Of these, almost a third (16,077) contained links to national news sources online such as the *Guardian*, the BBC and the *Telegraph*.

Yet rather than reiterate or support the mainstream news agenda, these responses were frequently critical of the claims made by the parties and mainstream media. This

criticism generally took one of three forms: tweets pointing to inconsistencies between the claims and the sources on which they were based; tweets pointing to other sources that contradicted claims made; and tweets satirising political events or mainstream media.

When, at the start of the campaign, the Conservatives made the claim that a Labour government would raise household tax bills by £3,028 Danny Blanchflower (@D\_Blanchflower) used Twitter to point people to the Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis that disputed the claim. When the *Sunday Times* led with the headline 'Tories best for Workers Say Voters' and cited opinion poll findings, Adam Bienkov (@adambienkov) used Twitter to publish a picture of the actual poll results, which did not justify the headline.<sup>90</sup>

Political influencers would often act as amplifiers, discovering information and sources that challenged or contradicted the news and then sharing it with a larger network of followers on Twitter. When the Conservatives announced their 'right to buy' proposal as the centerpiece of their manifesto many newspapers hailed it as 'A New Revolution'<sup>91</sup> declaring that 'Maggie's 'Right To Buy' Dream Is Back.'<sup>92</sup> Some political influencers on Twitter were skeptical and used their connections to find and then spread information that undermined the proposal.

For instance, *Times* commentator Caitlin Moran (@caitlinmoran) used Twitter to spread critical tweets and posts about the right to buy policy by the National Housing Federation to her more than half a million followers ('Of all

90 Adam Bienkov, @AdamBienkov, 5 May 2015 <https://twitter.com/AdamBienkov/status/584633672344719360>.

91 Chapman, J., 'A new right to buy education', *Daily Mail*, 13 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3037686/A-new-right-buy-revolution-35-years-Maggie-s-visionary-policy-Cameron-pledges-property-dream-reality-1-3millionfamilies.html> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

92 Hall, M., 'Thatcher's 'right to buy' dream is back: Cameron's housing plan will help 1.3m families', *Express*, 14 April 2015, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/570310/David-Cameron-home-ownership-scheme-working-people> (Accessed 31 July 2015).

the daft ideas I've heard in a career in housing'...)<sup>93</sup>, by Jonn Elledge in the *New Statesman*,<sup>94</sup> and by friends and public figures,<sup>95</sup> in addition to links to pieces in the *Mirror*<sup>96</sup> and at *BBC Reality Check*.<sup>97</sup>

Twitter was also used as a way of co-ordinating scrutiny of stories in the press. On Monday 27 April the *Telegraph* published the letter from small businesses that was later exposed as having been created by CCHQ (see chapter seven). Shortly after the story was published *Buzzfeed*'s Jim Waterson tweeted that the letter originated in Conservative headquarters.<sup>98</sup> Soon after it was published on Monday, freelance journalist and commentator Alex Andreou began co-ordinating an investigation of the signatories.

With the help of others on Twitter and via his blog, Andreou was able to point to numerous duplicate names, dissolved companies, businesses who claimed not to have signed, as well as a number prospective Conservative parliamentary candidates: 'quick search finds 6 PPCs on the letter, probably more' @SussexOwl1 tweeted at Andreou.<sup>99</sup> By the end of the day Andreou was praising the ability of Twitter to help expose deceit: 'Twitter is making it - in some ways - more difficult to lie. We are talking directly to each other, with no mediators. It's wonderful.'<sup>100</sup>

93 Caitlin Moran, @caitlinmoran, 14 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/caitlinmoran/status/587881655110631424>

94 Rebekah Higgitt, @beckyfh, 14 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/beckyfh/status/587875881848299520>.

95 Alice Arnold, @alicearnold1, 14 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/alicearnold1/status/587878255786622976>.

96 Éoin, @LabourEoin, 14 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/LabourEoin/status/587876014639947776>.

97 @BBCRealityCheck, 14 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/BBCRealityCheck/status/592466499115319296/photo/1>.

98 Jim Waterson, @jimwaterson, 27 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/jimwaterson/status/592466499115319296/photo/1>.

99 Alex Andreou, @sturdyAlex, 27 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/sturdyAlex/status/592695883038380032>.

100 Alex Andreou, @sturdyAlex, 27 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/sturdyAlex/status/59274168702121856>.

Andreou's enthusiasm was, however, tempered by the response of mainstream media to his crowdsourced investigation. The *Telegraph*, according to Andreou, edited the signatories to the letter opaquely, but did not issue a correction or apology. The BBC questioned the validity of the letter in one programme, The *Daily Politics*, but continued to report it as news elsewhere.<sup>101</sup>

As well as pointing to inconsistencies and contradictions, political influencers spent a good deal of time satirising parties and press. 'Is Michael Fallon a Labour secret agent, a red in the Tory bed? Seeking a rational explanation for his hilarious OTT Tory-harming nutter act' Kevin Maguire asked on Twitter after Fallon's Radio 4 *Today Programme* interview.<sup>102</sup> When, on 30 April, the *Sun* published two different front pages in England and Scotland, one damning the SNP and the other praising it, Jonathan Haynes asked the paper on Twitter, 'Er guys, you know thanks to the internet everyone can see your hypocrisy, right?'<sup>103</sup>

Perhaps the most energy was put into satirising the Labour pledge stone unveiled on 3 May. Simon Blackwell's tweet, retweeted almost three thousand times, captures the flavour of many: 'Ed Miliband builds a policy cenotaph' Blackwell wrote, 'And you wonder why we stopped doing The Thick Of It'.<sup>104</sup>

During the campaign political influencers tweeted on average a dozen times a day. Of these, however, only about one in five were related to political issues. 35 per cent of their tweets were retweets – a considerably lower proportion than parliamentary candidates for whom almost 60 per cent of their tweets were retweets.

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<sup>101</sup> BBC News, 'David Cameron: "I'll work the hardest to secure victory"', *BBC News*, 27 April 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2015-32476188> (Accessed 2 August 2015).

<sup>102</sup> Kevin Maguire, @kevin\_maguire, 9 April 2015 [https://twitter.com/Kevin\\_Maguire/status/586076846099460097](https://twitter.com/Kevin_Maguire/status/586076846099460097).

<sup>103</sup> Jonathan Haynes, @jonathanhaynes, 29 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/JonathanHaynes/status/593518424963174403/photo/1>.

<sup>104</sup> Simon Blackwell, @simonblackwell, 3 May 2015 <https://twitter.com/simonblackwell/status/594789643759001600/photo/1>.

Political influencers acted as both the commentators and the activists of Twitter. They could be relied on to focus on the mainstream news agenda, to react and respond to it, and often to question and seek to subvert it.

## Policy specialists

Policy specialists on Twitter behaved quite differently to political influencers, and to one another. We discovered this by studying specialists in two distinct areas of policy: foreign policy and defence, and social policy. In each of these areas we identified the key influencers (criteria for selection are outlined in the methods section) and followed their tweets over the course of the 2015 official election campaign.

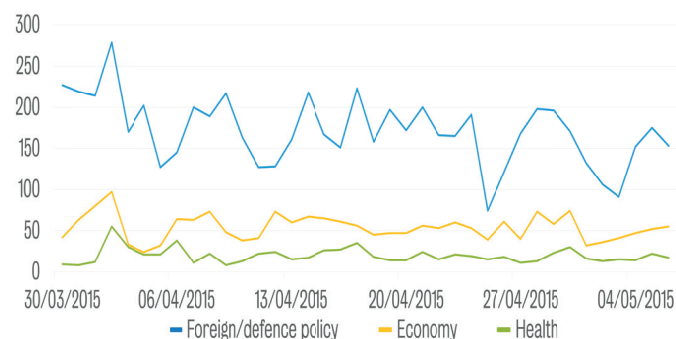
## Defence policy influencers

We analysed 150 defence policy influencers tweeting regularly throughout the 2015 campaign. Approximately a third of these had links to journalism, as correspondents or commentators for mainstream news, for example. This included Julian Borger, Fergal Keane, Jeremy Bowen, Jonathan Rugman and Deborah Haynes. Just over a quarter were connected to academia or think tanks, such as Chatham House, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), the Quilliam Foundation, King's College London and SOAS. The remainder were a mixture of business, politics, military, civil service and NGOs. 94 per cent of them were male. On average they were tweeting eight times a day.

Often the defence policy influencers made reference in their biographies to international experience and expertise. This could be journalistic or military experience, or reference to time spent in countries in the Middle East or Afghanistan. If they affiliated themselves to a political party it was more likely to be the Conservatives or UKIP than any from the left or centre left.

When they tweeted about political issues they were far more likely to tweet about defence and foreign policy than other subjects. 48 per cent of their political tweets were about defence and foreign policy, as compared to 8 per cent for our sample overall. Figure 7 shows how focused on defence and foreign policy these influencers were.

**Figure 7:** Tweets on selected issues by defence policy influencers, 30 March to 6 May



These influencers followed the international news agenda, focusing on geopolitical issues and world events, particularly in the Middle East. During the campaign they were tweeting about ISIS/ISIL, Russia and Putin, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, European defence forces, and military anniversaries such as Gallipoli. When they tweeted about domestic campaign issues they focused on Trident and defence spending (and the NATO defence spending target of 2 per cent of GDP).

Even when the campaign agenda focused on defence, it did not excite defence policy influencers as much as other groups. On 9 April, for example, when the Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, claimed that Trident would not be safe under Ed Miliband, tweets about defence and foreign policy amongst this group rose only 25 per cent. Across the whole sample of Twitter profiles, tweets on defence more than tripled (from a low base).

Unlike the political influencers they did not focus their attention on reacting or responding to party political statements or UK mainstream news stories. They would comment on domestic news but rarely to fact check or subvert it.

Instead, these specialist influencers appeared to see their main role as reporting on, and raising awareness of, international geopolitical events. Their range of news sources included the AP, Reuters, Al Jazeera, Bloomberg and the *New York Times*, as well as the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph* and the BBC. Over half their tweets (54 per cent) contained a link and 56 per cent were retweets. Their agenda was set by international affairs and the extent to which these were relevant domestically, not by the party political or press agenda.

As an illustration of this, on Tuesday 14 April, as political influencers tweeted about the launch of the Conservative manifesto, and continued discussing the Labour one from the day before, defence policy influencers were more interested in what was happening in the Ukraine. For example Ron McLeod tweeted, 'Ukraine crisis: Further weapons withdrawals agreed' with a link to a map on the BBC website.<sup>105</sup>

### Social policy influencers

In terms of attitudes, interests and political perspective, social policy influencers could not be more different than defence policy influencers. Opinionated, politically engaged and UK centric, they were focused intently on health and social welfare.

We followed 268 social policy influencer Twitter accounts over the course of the campaign. Almost a quarter were from academia or think tanks. Fewer than one in five were working in journalism, 16 per cent were from organisations involved in housing, social care or welfare, 13 per cent

<sup>105</sup> Ron McLeod, @rm867, 14 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/rm867/status/587882960193454080>.

worked in the NHS or in mental health, and the remainder were activists, bloggers, charity workers, consultants and researchers. The list was 40 per cent female.

Amongst those on the list were the chief executive of the King's Fund and the director of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR), health writers and journal editors, a GP, housing lawyers and a number of anonymous tweeters. This last group included; @Ermintrude2 - 'Mostly doing mental health stuff' - with 8,424 followers; @bendygirl - 'Attempting transition from "scrounging scum" to "hard working, tax credits scrounger" status' - with 10,252 followers; and @latentexistence - 'I swear a lot about illness, disability and politicians' - with 6,468 followers. On average, the social policy influencers had just below 8,000 followers each before the start of the campaign.

This group was highly engaged in politics on Twitter. 40 per cent of their tweets were related to political issues, as compared to less than 20 per cent of political influencer tweets. When they tweeted about politics, social policy influencers were likely to tweet about one of three issues; health, welfare or housing. Seven out of ten tweets about political issues were about these issues. They also tweeted often, averaging 12 tweets a day.

The social policy influencers engaged actively in the campaign, but chiefly where it related to their three areas of concern. Therefore, over the course of the six week campaign their tweets concentrated on issues like the funding of the NHS, childcare, mental health, benefits, obesity, GPs surgeries, disabilities, the bedroom tax, hospital closures, food banks, and other health, welfare and housing issues.

Although most did not formally associate themselves with a party, they were often critical of the Conservatives. When the Conservatives announced the 'right to buy' housing proposals in their manifesto, for example, social policy influencers focused on criticisms of the proposals.

Often they would link to non mainstream sources; blogs, charities, think tank reports, and niche sites like Londonista or the London Review of Books. For example, @Helen121 tweeted: 'Why Right to Buy is such a bad idea, & analysis of its legacy of destruction. James Meek in the #LRB: <http://t.co/jImucaryZx> via @LRB'.<sup>106</sup>

The agenda of the social policy influencers would often overlap with – and consciously relate to – issues in the press, but occasionally it would diverge. This divergence was particularly apparent in the week beginning Monday 20 April when Labour sought to push health to the top of the campaign agenda. That week also saw Labour and the Liberal Democrats launch disability manifestos, a King's Fund healthcare debate with Jeremy Hunt and Andy Burnham, and the release of figures from the Trussell Trust on the number of visits to food banks.<sup>107</sup>

Yet during this same week, coverage of health in the mainstream media actually fell. The number of articles on health published across the 16 leading national news sites (including bbc.co.uk) dropped from 563 the previous week to 510 in week four. By contrast, the number of health related tweets by social policy influencers – the issue they were already tweeting most about – rose by 10 per cent (from 4,266 tweets to 4,695).

On Wednesday 22 April, the Trussell Trust released figures showing the number of visits to food banks had increased by 19 per cent over the previous year to 1,084,604.<sup>108</sup> The story did not feature in the print editions of some of the largest selling national newspapers. According to left-leaning blog *Left Foot Forward* the *Daily Mail*, the *Telegraph*, the *Sun*, the *Express*, and the *Times*

106 Helen121, @Helen121, 14 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/Helen121/status/587869394023358464>.

107 The King's Fund, 'General election 2015 – the health and care debate', 21 April 2015, <http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/events/general-election-2015-health-and-care-debate> (Accessed 29 July 2015).

108 Trussell Trust, *Foodbank use tops one million for first time says Trussell Trust*, 22 April 2015 <http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/Press/Trussell-Trust-foodbank-use-tops-one-million.pdf> (Accessed 29th July 2015).

did not cover the news in their print editions (though the *Daily Mail* did publish a story online).<sup>109</sup> When the story was covered by the *Telegraph* it was to highlight how the Trussell Trust had been forced to clarify its headline figures.<sup>110</sup>

By contrast, the news triggered much debate on Twitter and online, including amongst social policy influencers. In the absence of much mainstream news coverage, social policy influencers linked to the Trussell Trust statistics themselves,<sup>111</sup> and to older tweets including the 'List of reasons people had benefits cut and turned to foodbanks,'<sup>112</sup> and to Clare Gerada's tweet of 28 March 'Sadly, last week, I referred more patients to the food bank than I did to A&E. 'Something profoundly wrong with the way we live today'.<sup>113</sup>

The 2015 campaign was not the campaign these influencers would have sought. For them, the key election issue was health and welfare more broadly. They were not able to alter the broader public agenda, but they did use Twitter to vent their political frustration, to express their political skepticism and to point their followers to non-mainstream sources.

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109 Barnett, A., 'One million foodbank visits, but not one story in the Tory press', *Left Foot Forward*, 22 April 2015, <http://leftfootforward.org/2015/04/one-millionfoodbank-visits-but-not-one-story-in-the-tory-press/> (Accessed 29 July 2015).

110 Hope, C., 'Number of different people visiting foodbanks is 500,000, not one million, says Trussell Trust', *The Telegraph*, 22 April 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/11555010/Number-of-different-people-visitingfoodbanks-is-500000-not-one-million-says-Trussell-Trust.html> (Accessed 29 July 2015).

111 The Trussell Trust, @TrussellTrust, 22 April 2015 <https://twitter.com/TrussellTrust/status/590813979062247424>.

112 Chris Coltrane, @chris\_coltrane, 19 April 2015 [https://twitter.com/chris\\_coltrane/status/58992190082441216](https://twitter.com/chris_coltrane/status/58992190082441216).

113 Clare Gerada, @clarercgp, 28 March 2015 <https://twitter.com/clarercgp/status/581712278464176128>.

## 9 | Agenda setting and public opinion



## 9 | Agenda setting and public opinion

There were clear discrepancies between what most of the public deemed to be the important issues facing the country during the campaign, and the issues that the news media chose to focus on.

This is apparent if one compares the agendas of mainstream media, and political actors and influencers on Twitter, with responses to Ipsos MORI's monthly polling on the most important issues facing the UK.

Ipsos MORI has been asking people what they think are the most important issues facing Britain on a regular basis for almost three decades. As set out in the methodology, this Issues Index has been developed based on regular face to face interviews of a sample of the population. Respondents are asked two questions:

1. What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?
2. What do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?

They are not prompted with answers but given the freedom to say which issues they believe to be important. In total, the Issues Index identifies 38 policy areas.

Comparing the findings of our analysis and the Ipsos MORI Issues index reveals two things. It shows that the coverage of political issues by mainstream media, as well as by political actors and influencers on Twitter, was not proportionate to the weight of importance that the public gave to each issue. It also shows that public opinion on these issues did not appear to converge with the mainstream media agenda during the campaign.

Throughout the campaign the national news media focused their attention heavily on the economy. 31 per cent of articles that referenced a political issue referred to the economy. Amongst political actors and influencers on Twitter the primary focus was the same: 31 per cent of tweets that referenced a political issue referenced the economy. However, the Ipsos MORI Issues Index data from January to May 2015 showed that, for four of the five months, the economy was not seen as the most important issue facing Britain. Only in April was it seen as most important, and then its importance was equal to immigration.<sup>114</sup>

Health was the second most covered topic in mainstream media, but with far less coverage devoted to it than to the economy. 11 per cent of news articles referenced health, while on Twitter the proportion was higher, at 18 per cent. Yet for the public it was consistently one of the three most important issues facing Britain, based on the Issues Index Question 1, and considered the most important issue at the beginning of the year (when there was a reported A&E crisis in hospitals).<sup>115</sup>

The most significant difference between agendas was regarding immigration. Immigration was consistently considered by the public to be one of the three most important issues facing Britain between January and May 2015. In February, March, April and May, during the period of the election campaign, it was seen as the most important issue facing Britain.<sup>116</sup> Yet, by contrast, it was the fifth most covered topic in mainstream media, behind the economy, health, education, and foreign policy and defence. Just seven per cent of all articles on political topics referred to the issue of immigration. Amongst political actors and influencers on Twitter the proportion was lower still. Only five per cent of

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<sup>114</sup> Ipsos MORI Issues Index, January – May 2015. Interviews with a representative quota sample of 966 adults aged 18+ at 159 sampling points across Great Britain. Interviews conducted face-to-face. Responses to Question 1: 'What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?'.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*

tweets that referred to political issues referred to the issue of immigration, making it the ninth most discussed political topic.

We also know, based on the analysis in this report, that parliamentary candidates from the two main parties raised the issue of immigration on Twitter far less than they raised the economy. 56 per cent of Conservative candidates' tweets were about the economy as compared to three per cent about immigration. For Labour candidates the comparable figures were 45 per cent and less than three per cent.

It is not possible to judge the extent to which the lack of coverage of immigration in the mainstream media was deliberate or not. It is possible, however, to point to the marked discrepancy between coverage and public concern, in addition to the low levels of discussion of immigration amongst Conservative and Labour candidates, even when the issue was a subject of national and European debate in the third and fourth weeks of the campaign.

Yet, whether deliberate or not, the lack of coverage did not appear to diminish the importance of the issue in the minds of the public. In May 2015 it was still considered the most important issue facing Britain.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*

## 10 | Conclusion



## 10 | Conclusion

The Conservatives won a majority at the 2015 UK General Election. They also, in terms of agenda setting, won the campaign. Based on the way in which the Conservatives campaigned, it is evident that the party preferred the election to be fought around the issue of the economy.

Mainstream news coverage, for the most part, adopted the Conservatives' agenda, and editorial comment followed. This then framed much of the debate amongst primary political actors and influencers on Twitter. A significant proportion of 2015 campaign debate therefore focused on specific Conservative economic policies – inheritance tax, right to buy, rail fare freezes and spending commitments – rather than the policies of other parties, or on issues of public concern that the main parties were not discussing (such as immigration). The occasional exceptions, such as coverage of Labour's non domicile announcement, were notable because they bucked the trend.

Much of the press chose to follow the lead of the two main parties when it came to the campaign agenda, particularly the lead of the Conservatives. Certain newspapers went further and coordinated with the Conservative party on particular announcements – such as proposals to introduce laws to lock out under 18 year olds from porn sites online. Rarely did newspapers try to disrupt the party political agenda or radically shift the terms of debate, though there were certain notable, but largely unsuccessful, exceptions.

Conversely, on Twitter political influencers and policy specialists challenged top down messages. Claims about 'Labour's tax bombshell', about the endorsement of the Conservatives by small businesses and Labour's pledges

carved in stone, were criticised and satirised on Twitter. Yet usually these challenges on social media were not reflected back in mainstream media, or at least not in the outlets that published the original claims.

Policy specialists on Twitter behaved differently from the more general political influencers and from political actors. They were highly motivated by politics, but focused on one or a small range of political issues. For the defence policy influencers this was international geopolitical news. They would search out this news and discuss it, no matter what the UK domestic news outlets were talking about. For the social policy influencers, domestic news was more important, though their interest was targeted at health, welfare and housing.

Ultimately, however, Twitter was more reactive to the mainstream news agenda and – consequently – to the parties' pronouncements and the media reporting of them. Where Twitter was engaged with domestic policy (defence policy influencers often were not), their issue agenda was heavily influenced by what other, traditional, sources and political parties were discussing.

It is paradoxical that, in an age in which anyone can publish, 2015 should have been such a controlled and co-ordinated election campaign. Media abundance, apparently, was perceived by the political parties as presenting increased risk rather than as a new opportunity for dialogue. A number of factors may make this different for future elections. Individuals and organisations will continue to grow their followings online and will compete for share of voice, with existing mainstream news outlets. Below the line and micro-targeted campaigning, that goes direct to individuals and communities of voters, is likely to rise in importance (but will be no less difficult to analyse). Plus, the failure of opinion polls to predict the election result may diminish their influence on political actors and the press at the next election.

Yet it is harder to predict the way in which the UK press will behave at the next election. During the period of the UK 2015 election campaign certain UK newspapers often chose to move beyond partisanship to become channels for party political messages. Their news coverage and comment was supportive, compliant and, in some instances, deferential. This damaged their credibility and authority amongst political influencers on Twitter, though whether it had a similar effect on the wider public is much harder to assess. We will have to wait and see whether the approach of certain press outlets during the campaign was anomalous, or if it is a model that will be repeated at the next election.

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## Appendix – further methodology

### Digital election analysis using Steno

Steno is an application developed using the 'Go' programming language. It consists of a server side set of programmes that collect textual content and certain metadata (date/time, byline, headline etc) from each URL published on any selected news website, allied with a client side graphical user interface (GUI) desktop application for analysis. The server side programmes run continuously to collect news articles, which are then stored in a database for retrieval. A second function allows for similar collection of tweets from selected Twitter accounts. Once downloaded by the researcher, these tweets and articles can be accessed and analysed using the GUI application. This application contains tools for deleting, tagging and untagging articles, and a query function that allows users to retrieve certain articles on the basis of content and/or metadata.

A simple scripting language is integrated with Steno to allow researchers to write commands to tag articles automatically on the basis of content. For example, *Election Unspun* used a script to automatically tag articles containing political parties. The fragment of script that tagged articles containing a reference to the Liberal Democrats read as follows:

- "Liberal Democrat" => TAG libdem
- "Liberal Democrats" -tags: libdem => TAG libdem
- "Lib Dem" -tags: libdem => TAG libdem
- "Lib Dems" -tags: libdem => TAG libdem

The tag ‘libdem’ was allocated to the party and the script fragment denotes the different text strings that were used to ascertain whether the party was mentioned (later lines in the script filtered out references to Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party). These scripts, often running to many hundreds of lines, could be applied by any researcher on a set of downloaded articles. In practice, the online news analysis component of *Election Unspun* used 10 different auto tagging scripts (including a script that automatically deleted news content that was not relevant to the present study, such as sport and entertainment), and the Twitter component used a combination of some of these ten scripts and specialised Twitter centric scripts. Extensive testing and reiteration of the scripts was done in January and February 2015 to ensure that all relevant articles were tagged accordingly.

As well as tagging news articles on the basis of content, irrelevant URLs were automatically deleted using a special script. These URLs consisted of sports, lifestyle, entertainment, reviews and so on – all aspects of news websites containing no political news. This reduced the weekly sample of news articles from around 32,000 to approximately 7,000.

In practice, although much of the tagging was automated, a researcher scanned each weekly list of articles to ensure that tagging had been done correctly. This took around four hours each week, but helped to ensure that there were no serious discrepancies in the dataset. It also ensured that when technical issues occurred (notably when the *Sun* changed their website configuration part of the way through the project), these could be caught early and rectified promptly.

## Analysing Policy Content: Adapting the Ipsos MORI Issues Index

Since a key aim of the project was to compare the different policy agendas of different groups of actors – political parties, media outlets, the public – we had to develop a

way to break down news coverage into discrete policy areas, and to build a script that could automatically tag articles and tweets on the basis of which policy areas they referenced. Because of its comprehensiveness, we decided to use the Ipsos MORI Issues Index – a series of 38 policy areas generated by the polling company over around three decades. The Issues Index takes the form of regular face to face interviews of a sample of the population. Respondents are not prompted, so a large range of policy concerns has been incorporated over the years.

In order to make the list of policy areas more manageable, we amalgamated some related policy areas. The final list comprised 14 policy areas:

- ♦ immigration/immigrants
- ♦ NHS/health
- ♦ economy/finance
- ♦ defence/foreign affairs/international terrorism
- ♦ crime/law and order/violence/vandalism/ASB/domestic terrorism
- ♦ education/schools
- ♦ welfare
- ♦ EU/Europe/Euro
- ♦ environment
- ♦ transport/public transport
- ♦ local government/council tax
- ♦ devolution/constitutional reform
- ♦ fuel and energy
- ♦ housing.

Scripts were then written and tested to ensure that articles were tagged on the basis of whether they contained references to one or more than one of these policy areas. The issues tagging script is 824 lines long, but the following fragment demonstrates a small part of the section dealing with NHS/health (where the allocated tag was 'nhs'):

```
- "nhs policy" => TAG nhs
- "health policy" => TAG nhs
- pub: =telegraph urls: /nhs/ => TAG nhs
- pub: thetimes urls: /health/ => TAG nhs
- headline: nhs => TAG nhs
- nhs => TAG nhs
- "national health service" => TAG nhs
- headline: "national health" => TAG nhs
```

As with all other scripts, this was revised and tested over a number of weeks until the *Election Unspun* weekly reports began on 16 February 2015. All scripts were then re-applied to the previous weekly article lists, dating back to 5 January. As with all other scripts, this was applied – with some minor adjustments to account for abbreviations – to the collected tweets as well as news articles.

### Analysing partisanship in the press: front pages and leader columns

In order to make some measurement of partisanship in campaign reporting, we conducted content analyses of newspaper front page headlines, and of newspapers' leader articles each day.

Both of these indicators of newspapers' policy agendas and partisanship present problems for purely digital analysis of news content. Not all newspapers publish their leader columns online (the *Daily Star* often does not feature leader columns even in print), while newspaper front pages (and therefore splash headlines) are by their very nature part of the print product. However, the homepages of newspapers

are not analogous to physical front pages, since the proportion of visitors reaching news websites via homepages is dwindling. These two features – leader articles and front page splashes – were therefore chosen as proxies for partisanship with some recognition that they could not be analysed in the same way as the rest of the Steno driven digital analysis.

Front pages were collected each day from a combination of sources, most notably the blog on the *BBC News* site, 'The Papers', and also the website [thepaperboy.com/uk](http://thepaperboy.com/uk). Each front page headline was then categorised on the basis of whether it reported on a particular party policy, or whether it supported or attacked a particular party. For instance, the *Sun* front page splash on 29 April 2015 ('Monster Raving Labour Party') was an explicit criticism of Labour. Supportive front pages more often consisted of support for, or detailed explanation of, a given party policy. For instance, the *Telegraph* front page of 5 April ('Osborne's Housing Revolution').

The second additional analysis – partisanship in newspaper leader columns - required some use of archives at the British Library. The *Mirror* newspapers do not publish their leaders online, and the *Sun* link to the 'Sun Says' section of the website was extremely erratic during the period of analysis, and very rarely linked to that day's leader.

All leaders were gathered using Steno and the British Library archive, after which two researchers analysed each leader column to ascertain whether they contained supportive or critical references to the main political parties. Supportive statements for a given party were recorded if the article included: praise for party leaders and senior party figures, praise for proposed party policies or previous records, and outright declarations of support or advice to readers to support the party. Critical statements were recorded if the article includes explicit criticism of the party, its leaders or senior figures, its policies, or declarations of antagonism to the party, including recommendations for readers not to vote for them.

These designations were not mutually exclusive, but were based on whether or not they were included in the article. For example, a leader article could be pro Conservative, anti Labour and anti Liberal Democrat, based on its content.

Articles in which there was a degree of doubt about whether language could be interpreted as supportive or critical of a party were scrutinised by all researchers, and a decision taken on consensus. Where doubt remained, the article was not labelled as partisan for or against the party in question.

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